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Bold *of* Heart

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Loyal Traitor
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Bold *of* Heart

A MYSTERY STORY FOR GIRLS

by

Helen Elmira Waite

ILLUSTRATED BY JEAN MACPHERSON

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To

Elbert M. Hoppenstedt

FOR HIS STRAIGHT-FROM-THE-SHOULDER CRITICISMS

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Bold *of* Heart

1

The Herricks Have Their Stubborn Way

ELEN let go the sudden frightened breath she had drawn and opened her eyes. Perhaps the tiny grey room was not a place of such absolute gloom as it had seemed to be when she closed them three seconds ago. And even if it was—there was nothing she could do about it except try to stiffen her mental backbone, and once and for all squarely face the prospect of remaining at St. Luke's for the next year. She had no special liking for the idea. But after all, a girl whose home has been broken up, and whose guardian uncle joined a scientific expedition to Tibet, cannot expect to have a very wide choice of plans! Especially when she had been careless enough to miss her footing and plunge headlong down a flight of marble steps when her class visited an art museum, damaging her back and left knee so severely that the doctors agreed it might require a year for everything to mend properly.

It had been hard enough to keep a brave front in the first weeks when discomfort and disappointment and fear seemed to make up her whole world. And then when she reached the next stage, and pain gradually ebbed away and a little strength took its place, it had required more courage than Elen knew she possessed to get through each hospital day. To feel so nearly like the old Elen Herrick, and yet be so helpless and useless, was frightening.

It had been bad enough before, but now—after Mr. Austin's visit this afternoon —— Oh, why had he thought it was necessary to tell her that Dr. Arrowby had said she was sufficiently recovered to leave the hospital when he knew there was no place for her to go?

"Now what do you say to that, my dear?" Mr. Austin, who looked an over-grown pouter pigeon, beamed at her most benignly. "It seems you are doing marvelously! Dr. Arrowby says that if weekly treatments for your knee could be arranged, there is no reason for you to remain here! How's that for news, Miss Elen?"

It had a woeful sound to Elen. To hear that after four weary, painful months in a hospital you were ready to go home, and then not to have a home waiting to welcome you ——

Uncle Mark's dowdy house just off the campus of Herald College in Delmar was rented to the professor who was taking over Uncle Mark's work. And of course she couldn't go back to The Ballister School; there'd be no place at school for a girl who would be obliged to spend the next six months or so on a chaise-longue or in a rolling chair.

There was no reason that Elen could see for Mr. Austin to rub his hands softly back and forth, and dimple as he was doing. She and Uncle Mark had laughed sometimes at the little lawyer's pompous ways, but Uncle Mark probably had never seen him look so bland and delighted with himself.

" Ah—the next question is, where do you think you'd like to go when you leave? " For just a minute Mr. Austin seemed embarrassed. " Ah—you know how glad Mrs. Austin and I—er—would be to have you at Brookside with us,—ah, yes, very glad! But you know, my dear, our apartment is somewhat small, and—er—I'm afraid we couldn't give you the proper attention, much as we'd like to be able to."

Elen had seen Mrs. Austin, and she could imagine just how delighted that petulant, nervous lady would be to have her as a guest!

" Couldn't it be arranged to have me stay on here? " she had asked. A hospital teaches a person a variety of things, and one of the most useful that Elen had learned was that if you are careful to make your tone light and keep your sentences short, you can almost always make your voice sound steady and perhaps even casual, no matter what your sensations may be. And just then Elen was feeling anything but casual.

" Oh, would you really like to stay on here? " Mr. Austin tried to look playful. " Have you enjoyed yourself so much? What a good recommendation for St. Luke's! Well, perhaps, per-haps! We must view this matter from every angle, you know, Miss Elen. Every angle, yes. Something else may turn up! "

Nothing else would turn up. It couldn't. After Mr.

Austin had gone the whole prospect made her cringe. The very walls seemed to be closing in. It was then that she had shut her eyes. Things were steadier now. The really appalling aspect of the tiny grey room was the unfortunate view: The one large window looked out upon the blank red side-wall of a fur storage house! And to be obliged to gaze upon that for another six months or longer ——

Oh, well, she certainly wouldn't be spending all the time in her room! The hospital solariums were nice places, and on mild days she would go up to the roof. The nurses were a gay and friendly lot. One or two of them had smuggled new babies in for her to see. Perhaps Miss Hawley or Miss Smith would be willing to buy her some of her favorite prints to disguise the bleakness of her walls. And there ought to be something she could do about the hospital. She would ask. Tomorrow she would write to Mrs. Ballister and see if there was some way for her to carry on her school subjects. Now would really be a good time to begin again, right after mid-years ——

That was exactly what she had been trying to forget. Mid-years. She was to have spent this mid-year holiday with the Herricks of Meredith. Christmas, too. And thinking about Sally and Uncle Billy, Stephen and Aunt Claire and little Tom, and the satisfying days she would have been having with them if she had only not turned her head as she started down the museum staircase, was dangerous, the surest way in the world to bring on a terrible attack of self-pity.

Elen Herrick had spent most of her sixteen years with her uncle, Professor Mark Powers, a bachelor who taught at Herald College, and lived in a rather drab little house a short distance away. He was genuinely fond of Elen, and they had been good comrades, but he had always said frankly that his teaching was more important than any individual. Mrs. Klein, his housekeeper, had been kindness itself, and Elen felt a warm affection for her, but somehow she had always a queer feeling that something was lacking in the Powers' house.

And then, last summer, Uncle Billy Herrick, who had just brought his family from the far west a few months before, invited her to come to the summer cabin at Lake Pakawake, and make the acquaintance of her Herrick relations. For the first time she had learned what a closely-knit family really was. William Herrick was quite as busy as Mark Powers; his secretary came out to the cabin twice a week, and important people were always dropping in, but he was never too busy to join in the family's morning swim or the evening canoe trip, and he could concoct an amazingly good salad for a picnic supper. He was always the best of comrades to his children. Aunt Claire had the warmest and most satisfying personality of anyone Elen had ever met, and as for her three cousins—Elen wondered again and again why she had been obliged to go without knowing them for so many years? They were all so different that it was a little astonishing to think of them as brothers and sister. Sally, Elen's own age, was fair of hair and skin, quick about everything she did, clever, buoyant of spirit, inclined toward sarcasm. Seventeen-year-old Steve the impulsive, who could be ridiculous and gay one minute and sunk in an abyss of despair the next, was rather too sensitive for his own good. Tom, the nine-year-old, dark as an Indian, noisy, inquisitive, was a good bit of a nuisance to everybody. Oh, yes, they were remarkably unlike, and yet there was a strong uniting chord of understanding. Living with them, Elen had the aching conviction that she would never be satisfied to be outside a " family " again.

Not that Elen had ever been a forlorn person—she was much too friendly and gay for that, but her vacations were usually spent on a placid little New Hampshire farm which Professor Powers owned, or in Delmar, which city, after the college students had departed, might have served as the model for the deserted village. No, Elen hadn't been forlorn, exactly, but at Pakawake she felt as if she had suddenly stepped out of a cocoon.

Pakawake was a place where friendliness and fun and beauty were to be had for the taking. It wasn't a resort, just a gathering of perhaps twenty cottages nestled at one end of Lake Pakawake, but to Elen it had been a place of sheer joy. She loved the cool, dimpling lake cupped at the base of Twin Mountains; the sudden glorious storms of wind and rain that swept the dark pines; the mountain trails which held hidden spots of loveliness; the flaming sunsets which touched the water with such waves of beauty. Just the way in which the cottony clouds caressed the peaks of Castor and Pollux could stir her to ecstasy.

Never before had she known anything like the spontaneous comradeship the cottagers gave each other. They had accepted her as one of themselves from the start.

Eunice Blake taught her to paddle a canoe. Larry Peel said she was one of the few girls he knew who really belonged on horseback. He had escorted her over the woods trail to the summit of Mount Castor, and initiated her into the ways of exploring with a camera.

When in September she had been obliged to return to Delmar, everything seemed dingy and dull and colorless after the Herricks' and Pakawake! Elen had fought valiantly against the reaction, feeling guiltily disloyal to Uncle Mark and Mrs. Klein, but——

As it happened, Elen was not the only person for whom life at Herald College had begun to pall. Professor Mark Powers might teach science, but he was far from being the usual picture of a professor. He was anything but meek, stoop-shouldered or shy. On the contrary, he was an active, sturdily-built man, and his voice could be a roar which would have done credit to an old-time sea-captain! Elen had been home only a week when her uncle looked up from his morning mail with a broad grin.

"Time to tell you now, Elen! You've heard me say I'd have been a scientific explorer if only exploration was a paying profession? And you remember Dr. Hamilton Raddell? He and Frank Thompson have organized an expedition to go into the interior of Tibet. Asked me to go with them. So I've obtained a two-year leave of absence from the college, and here's my passport!"

As for Elen, Uncle Mark had registered her at The Ballister School, and there was always the New Hampshire farm for her to visit during vacations. However, when Mr. Herrick read of Professor Powers' appointment to the expedition, he had volunteered to take charge of Elen's vacations.

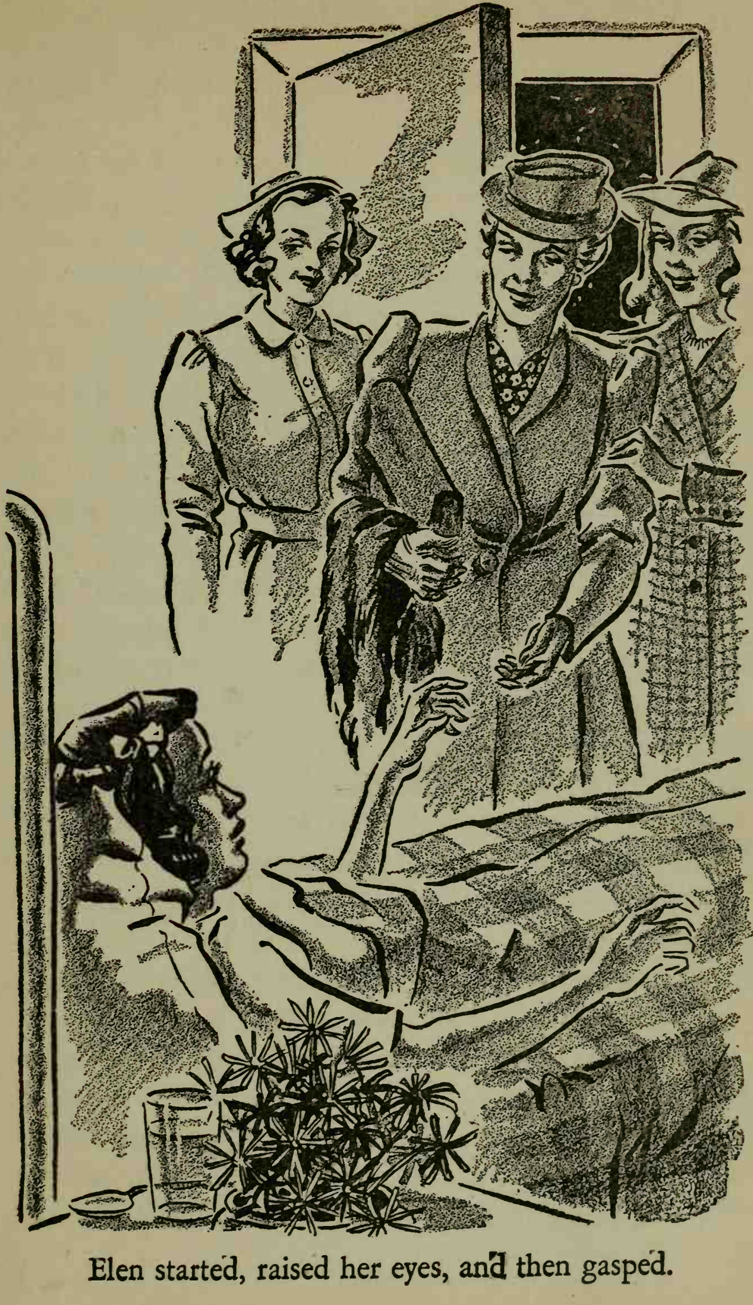
No one could have lived with Uncle Mark for several years without encountering several of his astonishingly abrupt decisions, but this one had left Elen awed and gasping.

She probably would have enjoyed herself at Ballister had she been given a chance, but she was destined never to have more than a fleeting acquaintance with the school. She had been one of its pupils less than a month when she went with a small group to visit the art museum in a nearby city, where the accident occurred. So here she was, in this cubbyhole of a room at St. Luke's, and here she would remain for months and months, gazing at the red side-wall of Whipple and Barron's Fur Storage plant! Suddenly the wall began to behave queerly. Now why—*why* had Mr. Austin been possessed to tell her that the doctors said she was well enough to leave? It would have been so much easier not to have known ——

" More visitors, Elen! " Miss Smith's crisp voice came from the doorway.

Elen started, raised her eyes, and then gasped. Aunt Claire was standing on the threshold. Yes, and the person with her was unmistakably Sally! Aunt Claire had come twice before, with Uncle Billy, but Meredith was a good eighty miles away, and the Herricks were a busy family.

Even as she held out her hands with a joyous cry, Elen braced herself. She must be thoroughly on her guard now. She had learned at Pakawake that sometimes Aunt Claire



Elen started, raised her eyes, and then gasped.

had a most uncanny way of seeing the very things you would prefer not to have seen!

"Well, I must say this *is* a pretty place!" Sally stopped at the head of the bed and surveyed her cousin's surroundings with scorn. "How long have you been incarcerated here? Four months? Four months in this—this mouse-trap? *Grey* ceiling—*grey* walls—*grey floor* ——" With every drawled word her contempt became more evident! "It's a wonder you can do more than squeak! Oh, what I couldn't do to this room with a few cans of paint!"

Elen caught her breath and actually laughed. "Oh, Sally, you could, couldn't you? I dare you to do it! Let's! What colors would you use?"

"Let's see ——" Sally sat down and threw her gloves across to the little table. Then she waved her hands lightly. "Whatever colors you say, Madame! The Herrick Decorating Expert is at your service! Will you have a pale blue ceiling with gold and silver stars? Very chic and modern. Or do you prefer a daytime effect, with a few fluffy clouds in evidence? Or are you very old-fashioned in your ideas, and would you like a ceiling of oak beams?"

"We-ll," Elen pretended to consider, "perhaps I *am* old-fashioned. You can put up the beams. Unless—they're too expensive?"

Sally shook her fair head. "Oh, don't let that trouble you! Oak beams it is. Now we'll decide about the walls: Cream? Orange? Apple-green?"

"The green, I think," Elen meditated, and for some reason Aunt Claire's lips twitched, although she didn't speak.

"And darker green for the furniture—this hospital won't know itself when I'm finished —— Oh, Elen!" Sally's light speech changed suddenly to a wail, "how did you manage to get yourself into such a horrid place?"

"It was really very easy," said Elen grimly. And then, at sight of Sally's unsteady chin, she managed to laugh again. "But it isn't so terrible, really. I'm sorry you didn't find me up on the roof or in the solarium. And you've no idea how many exciting things happen in a hospital. You know, Anthony Haverforce was brought here last week after his plane crashed. Of course he wasn't badly hurt—just a couple of broken ribs, but Miss Smith got his autograph for everyone on this floor! And we had a wedding here last night! The girl across the hall broke her leg just a week before her wedding day, and she wouldn't postpone it, so the groom, and the minister, and maid-of-honor and the best man and her parents all managed to squeeze in. It was a tight fit, but they did it. And I had part of the bride's bouquet and a slice of her cake ——"

Sally looked unimpressed. "Sure the Governor of the State wasn't inaugurated here last month?" she inquired. "Mummie, do you think we can wrench her away from this fascinating place?"

"Well, I'm certainly going to try." Aunt Claire spoke for the first time. She leaned forward and caught Elen's eyes. "Elen, Sally and I have come to tell you that just because we couldn't have you at Christmas and mid-years, we're not going to be cheated out of adding you to our family. Next week, when you're ready to leave St. Luke's, you're coming to Meredith to us."

Elen stared a little wildly. Something must have gone wrong with her ears. Then she clutched the sides of her narrow bed with both hands. " No! " she said breathlessly. " No! I can't—you know I can't! "

" Oh, yes, you can." Aunt Claire's voice was reassuring. " Both Dr. Arrowby and Dr. Whitten agree you're quite well enough to come."

It was like Aunt Claire to purposely misunderstand. But—Elen shook her head vehemently. " I—I *won't* come while I'm like this ——" Oh, why must they tempt her?

Aunt Claire only smiled. " I've been talking to the doctors," she said calmly. " And I know all about you. You'll be surprised how much you'll be able to do in a short time—everything except run around. We've had this planned for weeks. Uncle Billy and Mr. Austin have everything arranged."

So that was why Mr. Austin had looked so pleased and satisfied with himself, and why he hinted something might turn up! But she mustn't go! It wouldn't be fair to any of the Herricks! She made a desperate effort to steady her voice and tell Aunt Claire so.

" It looks to me as though Len is so attached to this wonderful hospital that she's lost all her love for us," interjected Sally mournfully.

" Elen," Aunt Claire's mouth quirked with humor, " is only showing that she's exactly like every other Herrick—you Herricks could teach a mule new ways of being stubborn! But I warn you, Elen, it won't work. It won't work at all. We've been wanting you as a member of our family ever since you were with us at Pakawake, and we're not going to miss having you. Your Uncle Mark isn't going to leave his expedition, and he's willing that you come to us. So we're going to have you, no matter what you say. And one of our neighbors is a splendid young doctor who'll keep his eye on you."

Elen felt as though something was drawing itself tight in her throat. "Oh, please, won't you understand, Aunt Claire? I—I just *won't* come as long as I'm so useless ——"

Sally turned away with a queer little sound, but Aunt Claire still met Elen's pleading grey eyes steadfastly.

"I haven't much use for useless people myself, so I'll guarantee not to let you be one," she promised, and then suddenly a gay note leaped into her voice. "Elen, didn't you hear what I said about the Herricks? When they intend to have a thing—they *have* it! You've got a nice obstinate streak of your own, child, but there are five stubborn Herricks all against you. Now remember: The ambulance will call for you at three o'clock next Saturday afternoon to bring you out to Meredith. And that's final!"

2

With Oak Beams and Green Paint

ENTERING with Elen's dinner tray, Miss Smith cast an understanding and approving eye at the delicate color which had crept into her patient's cheeks. " So they told you, did they? Mrs. Herrick certainly wasted no time in coming over to settle all the details. Dr. Arrowby phoned her yesterday that you could leave next week. Well, what do *you* think of it? "

" I—I think I should stay here." Elen's voice was unhappy. " Oh, it's lovely of them to offer to take me, but after all—why, we never even knew each other until last summer, and when I'll be such a nuisance ——"

Miss Smith was standing in shadow, so Elen was unaware of the sudden softness in the black eyes. She only heard the chuckle in the Irish voice. " Did you say it was lovely of them to ' offer ' to take you? Oh, but they never did! Mr. Herrick merely *informed* Dr. Arrowby that you were coming to Meredith when you were well enough to travel! It's a pity if you'd rather stay here with us, for I have a little notion that when Mr. William Herrick *wants* a thing—he gets it! "

What was it Aunt Claire had said? " When the Herricks intend to have a thing—they *have* it " ? Oh, but ——

No one seemed impressed with her protests. Little Mr. Austin resembled a beneficent cherub on his next visit, smiling and dimpling as though the whole affair had been his own personal inspiration.

" Now what did I tell you, my dear? " he inquired, bobbing his bald head until Elen wanted to reach out and hold it fast. " Didn't I warn you not to be too hasty in settling down comfortably here at St. Luke's? Your uncle—your Uncle William, you understand—and I have planned this for months. He tells me they have most suitable accommodations for you. It seems that—no, I shouldn't give away any of his secrets. You'll be seeing them for yourself in a few days. But it's a very happy solution, my dear, ver-ry hap-py." He beamed, and patted his own cheek.

" Uncle Billy's being a peach. But really, Mr. Austin, can't you see I shouldn't go? " Did it sound horribly ungrateful? And no one could ever begin to guess how much she wanted to go to Meredith. But to take advantage of Uncle Billy's generosity now ——

Mr. Austin was staring at her. " Why, my dear, of course you should. The Herricks have promised to give you every attention, and Dr. Arrowby tells me he knows this young Dr. Knight, and has complete confidence in him."

Elen had a wild impulse to snatch her hairbrush from the nearby bureau and hurl it at the complacent little man. How *could* a person who had been intelligent enough to go through law school and build up a reputation for being clever be so incredibly stupid? And his voice was so cushiony and reassuring! Elen's mouth had a little of the grim look Uncle Mark's wore when his classes were provokingly dumb. She came very near giving him a glare.

"I was thinking of the trouble I would be for the Herricks," she explained stiffly, "and I think Uncle Mark should be asked ——"

"Aha! I've been wondering when you would come to that!" Mr. Austin waggled a playful finger. "Your Uncle William cabled Professor Powers for permission to take you out to Meredith—and got it, too. You see, my dear? You see?"

Yes, Elen saw. Aunt Claire was right. They did mean to have her.

After that the days began to drag with interminable slowness. It had been one thing to face the thought of staying on and trying to convince oneself that the prospect was not so terrible at St. Luke's when she was so firmly assured there was no hope of doing anything else, but now that, despite all her protests, she actually was going to the Herricks, would be caught up once again into their circle of warm friendliness and laughter, it seemed as if it would be eons before she would feel the gentle touch of Aunt Claire's fingers against her cheek, or hear Sally's gay, nonsensical speeches, hear Steve's 'cello or catch the understanding light in Uncle Billy's eyes, a light which seemed to make words unnecessary between them.

There had been a day in early September when she and Sally were returning from a sunset canoe trip, and Sally, watching her paddle turn in the rose-colored water, had exclaimed wistfully:

" Len! Why do we have to let you go back to Professor Powers? He's had you almost your whole life. It's our turn now. Why can't we take you back to Meredith with us? You belong to us."

And Elen, who had been having the same thoughts, had laughed shakily as she answered, " I'd give anything to be able to go."

Now she wondered what she would have said or done had she known what the price of her going to Meredith would be—a year without swimming, tennis, or the excitement of ice-hockey. A year without seeing the woods when they flung out their autumn banners and then changed to the exquisite grey and white loveliness of winter, and so to the green joyousness of spring. A year when she would not feel the sweep of wind and rain against her face, nor climb a hill to photograph the sunset clouds. A year when she would be left out of debates and dramatics—in short a year when she would be cut off from doing everything she loved. Oh, why couldn't she have crawled into some hole and hibernated until that time was past? It would have saved everybody concerned so much trouble.

Slowly the tightness of her mind relaxed. If she gave way to self-pity—*that* was no mood to take with her to Meredith. Her left knee might be practically useless and her back a poor support just at present, but at least she could still hold her head and her heart high!

Each time she woke in the early hours of Saturday morning and heard intermittent spurts of rain and wind against her window, Elen had a pang of dismay. Suppose Saturday proved stormy? Would the hospital authorities put off her journey? And Saturday, or so it seemed when she woke in the dull morning light, was as forlorn a day as she had ever seen. Bleak, with low-hung, dark clouds; no forthright rain now, but a mean, icy mist, so Miss Smith said. Elen carefully refrained from asking what time she was to leave, being possessed of a sick conviction that she wasn't going at all. Her cereal tasted like glue, and her toast choked her. Her mouth felt strange, and both her back and her knee began to remind her of their presence in no uncertain terms.

After she had taken her temperature and her pulse, Miss Smith's eyes twinkled. "Stop your fussing!" she commanded. "Oh, yes, you are—inside. Now you listen to your Cousin Hepzibah: It's a mean day and no mistake, but you'll find yourself in Meredith tonight. If we didn't give you an honorable discharge today I think Mr. William Herrick would be capable of trying to kidnap you!"

Elen smiled feebly, but of all the long and miserable days she had known at St. Luke's this particular Saturday was the worst. It was early afternoon before the door opened to admit Miss Smith and a tall, keen-faced young man with a look of quiet authority about him.

"Elen," said Miss Smith, "here is Dr. Knight—he has come to escort you to Meredith. Doctor, Miss Elen Herrick, and I wish you joy of her!"

Dr. Knight took the two steps necessary to reach the bed and held out his hand. For the first time since her present encounters with doctors began, Elen was meeting one who did not antagonize her with a deceptively cheerful air at his first entrance, nor cause her to shrivel under a cool and remote professional scrutiny. The look Allan Knight gave her was purely friendly, his handclasp very casual, yet when his fingers left hers the twisted and taut feeling she had had all morning began to ebb.

"The other Herricks call me 'Allan,' and I hope you will follow their example," remarked the young man. "Well, now that the moment has come, do you find yourself willing to leave, or will I be obliged to tear you away by force? From your family's accounts I gathered you were quite attached to this hospital."

Elen grinned faintly. "Well, I'd hate to be torn anywhere just at present—I'll try to come quietly."

"Good girl. I thought, being a Herrick, you'd be intelligent. Now, nurse, is the young lady dressed for her trip? Wrap her warmly. This isn't my idea of a perfect day for traveling."

Elen had been dressed and ready for more than an hour. As Miss Smith turned toward the wardrobe for her wraps, Elen took a deep breath and gathered her courage together. Here was a person you knew instinctively you could trust; a person who would give you a definite, straight-from-the-shoulder answer. And suddenly she felt she had to put the doubts which had been torturing her before him.

"Dr. Knight," she began desperately—and was disgusted to hear how high and queer her voice had become, "Dr. Knight, *you* know the Herricks—you're a friend. Tell me—*don't* you think it's horribly unfair to them to have me come to live with them now when I'm like—this?"

Miss Smith wheeled sharply and unprofessionally, but if Allan Knight caught her signal, it made absolutely no difference in his answer. His eyes met Elen's piteous questioning ones gravely.

"You want the truth, don't you? Then I'll say that I think your coming to join the family is the best thing that could possibly happen to your relatives just now. I can't tell you why, you'll probably find out for yourself, but that is my honest opinion."

Elen had little recollection of her first ambulance ride, but today, as she was slid carefully into the vehicle which was to bear her away from St. Luke's, she had the sudden sensation of being a loaf of bread being inserted into a hot oven!

Allan had been right about the weather, it was not an ideal day by any means, and the nurse who had come with the Meredith ambulance, Miss Norris, was polite and efficient, but when you had said that about her, you had to stop. There was nothing more to say. And as mile succeeded mile with the fog-like mist enveloping the car, Elen began to feel distinctly bored. All her attempts at conversation met with an unenthusiastic response and dwindled into nothingness. Finally she let her eyelids flutter down. Let Miss Norris entertain herself any way she chose. Elen Herrick's imagination was leaping ahead to Meredith, and pondering over Allan's answer to her question. Now why should her arrival be the best thing which could happen to the Herricks, now or at any other time?

And now especially, what earthly asset could she be with a knee which would not be in working order for months, and a very temperamental back?

The ride to Meredith was a long one, longer than it would have been ordinarily, because of the storm which had developed into fine sleet. Lights were glimmering along the streets, reflected in the icy pavements when the car stopped and Allan Knight's laughing voice informed her: "This is Mr. William Herrick's residence, 254 Magnolia Avenue, Meredith. Will the lady enter?"

Elen had a rather confused impression of eager voices, a broad beam of light coming from an open door, of being carried carefully up shallow steps, then having a fleeting glimpse of a white hall and a tall mahogany clock, but instead of being taken upstairs she was borne through several rooms on the first floor before she was deposited upon a bed opposite a dancing open fire.

"Well, Sally," Allan addressed the excited-faced girl who was hovering by the door, "you see before you your reluctant cousin. Even after I reached St. Luke's she had some doubts about coming. But if you use plenty of tact and patience, and don't expect too much all at once, I think she'll stop regretting having been dragged away from that delightful cell at St. Luke's!"

Miss Norris, disengaging Elen from her blankets, sniffed. Miss Norris knew Allan Knight was a remarkable and clever young doctor, but there were times when he seemed to indulge in a frivolous style highly unbecoming to his professional dignity.

"Shall I stay for an hour or so, doctor?" she inquired

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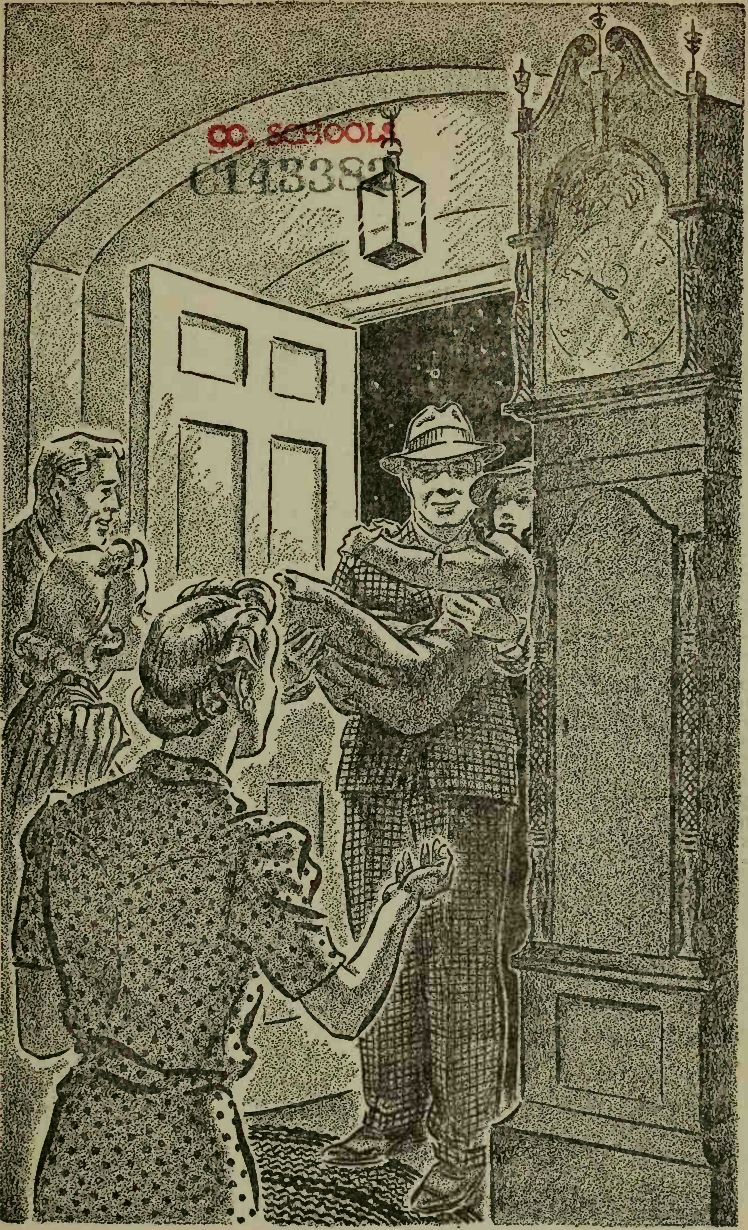


Elen had a rather confused impression of eager voices.

primly, and Elen thought she caught a glimpse of horror on Sally's expressive face. Allan murmured he did not think it was necessary, and Elen felt as relieved as Sally looked.

Presently everyone was gone, everyone except Aunt Claire and Sally, and Elen could draw a deep breath. Sally, standing at the foot of the bed, laughed a little shakily. " I feel just like that myself," she admitted, " to think that you're really here. Are you, do you suppose, or am I having a dream? But if you *are,*" and now her voice rose in soft triumph, " we're going to keep you in our clutches for at least two years, Len Herrick! "

" Elen must be tired with that long ride," interposed Aunt Claire; " don't alarm her too much gloating over our annexation of her."

" Is it alarming to be told how much we love you? " inquired Sally. " Sorry—no," she dropped a butterfly kiss on Elen's copper-brown hair, " no, I'm not sorry. We *do* love you. So there! "

Excitement had prevented Elen from focusing her attention on her surroundings with the exception of the glowing fire, but later as she ate—or tried to eat—the tempting dinner Aunt Claire brought in, her attention steadied and the details of the room caught her eyes.

" Are my eyes fooling me," she asked anxiously, " or are there really five windows? "

" Really five," Aunt Claire assured her.

Five windows, adorned with crisply dainty green and white polka-dotted curtains. Five! Why, after living in a room with one bleak space in the wall they seemed, even in the darkness, little short of a miracle. Even in Delmar, Elen's room had only two.

Indeed, the whole room was rather like a miracle. Long, Elen was to learn later that it ran the length of the house, and by no means narrow, it possessed a friendly atmosphere so many large rooms lack. Certainly she would never be oppressed by the feeling that the walls were closing upon her here. She saw low open bookshelves of mellowed oak wood built against one wall; here and there a lamp threw soft pools of light upon the dark tables and rose-upholstered furniture, but Elen's eyes were always drawn back to the red and orange and blue flames leaping upward in the small fireplace. To Elen any room which could boast an open fire was always perfect. Suddenly she was convinced that it would prove far easier to summon her courage to her aid in this room than it ever could be at St. Luke's.

On the mantel above the fireplace was a gorgeous bunch of scarlet berries in a copper bowl, a lovely thing against the green wall. Green paint—something stirred in Elen's memory. She glanced at the ceiling. It was—it *was* finished with oak beams, exactly as Sally had suggested to her a week ago!

"I was wondering when you'd notice that your order had been filled," Sally commented; "didn't I tell you the Herrick decorating expert was at your service?"

Elen still looked at the ceiling then and brought her incredulous gaze back to Aunt Claire's amused face and Sally's gleeful one. "Oh, but—but you *couldn't* have done this just on purpose for me——" she stammered.

"There's no telling what we *might* have done!" Sally waved her hands expressively, "but as a matter of pure fact, we didn't need to do anything. You were good enough to pick the exact combination we had."

"But suppose I'd had a yearning for a ceiling sprinkled with gold and silver stars and little fleecy clouds? I seem to remember you recommended something of the sort very highly!"

"Oh, but I knew I'd be able to maneuver you into choosing this room," said Sally with calm modesty.

Regretfully Elen laid down her fork. The contents of the tray was so good, so temptingly arranged, but her throat was too tight for food tonight. She was grateful that Aunt Claire made no comment. She only handed the tray to Sally and adjusted the lamp nearest Elen to throw a brighter light on the room.

"You can bless Lawrence Raymond's artistic temper (that was the word his mother used to me) for this room. He's the author of the biographies of Madame Roland and Jefferson and Henry Clay—all disguised as fiction. In between books it appears he's quite a sane and lovable person, but when a book is brewing he's the world's original grouch! Even his family finds him intolerable. So when they built this house they designed this room especially as a place of refuge for him when he was concocting a book. It can be shut off from the rest of the place, and he could suffer in peace. He even cooked his own meals ——"

"Yes, behold your own private kitchenette!" Sally darted across the room and flung open a door, and Elen had a glimpse of light on white and green enamel. " I don't suppose you can see all the beauties of your apartment from where you are, but tomorrow you can go on a tour of inspection. You'll see it's a very complete set-up. If Lawrence Raymond suffered here, he certainly did it in comfort! "

Elen's brain was beginning to whirl just a little. Perhaps Aunt Claire saw it, for she laid a cool hand against the girl's flushed cheek, and spoke quietly to her daughter. " We've chattered enough for tonight, Sally. Find your father and ask him if he'd like to call on his niece before she cuddles down for the night."

Uncle Billy must have been waiting for just such a summons, for he appeared almost at once. " Well, Elen," he spoke in the deep friendly voice Elen had loved since the first day she heard it at the Pakawake dock, " we can really claim you now! I hope you'll like the Herricks of Meredith as much as you liked the Herricks of Pakawake. Now just one thing more for tonight: Will you please try to believe that I didn't bring you here out of any sense of pity or duty, but because I've always wanted my brother Eric's child under my roof? "

William Herrick was neither so tall nor so broad-shouldered as Allan Knight, and he certainly could never compare with Uncle Mark in the matter of a commanding presence, but somehow, looking up at him, with both her hands in his firm clasp, Elen had a greater sense of comfort and security than she had felt in months.

Perhaps, after all, Sally had been right. Perhaps she did belong here.

3

Sally Tries to Sidestep an Honor

SALLY'S stencils clattered to the floor. A brush was rejected with a toss that sent it spinning halfway across the room. The little cans of paint were wrenched open by a violent hand. It was plain that Sally was in a stormy mood. Her hazel eyes were frosty and she had maintained a morose silence ever since her return from school that afternoon.

"Maiden, maiden, all forlorn!" teased Elen. "Why the desperate actions?"

Sally sat back on her heels, twisted her fingers through her hair until the short light curls stood straight up, and glared first at the fine white pellets striking against the windows and then at her cousin. "Because I hate this northeast wind. Because I abhor sleet. Because in assembly tomorrow I am to have the honor of introducing the most cocksure, self-righteous, meddling prig this State ever possessed!"

Elen choked back a giggle. Sally was not being humorous. And Elen's astonishment at her cousin's vehemence was genuine enough. " You must have some queer assignments at Samuel Howe High," she commented. " Why does the school have to meet such a horrible person? "

" Because," Sally's words sounded very much like the icy particles in the air outside, " Mr. Eustace Hathaway Britten adores going from school to school, ' making our history vitally real and forceful to the young people of today by recreating the glorious heroes of the Revolutionary War period in speech and act.'—That's his own modest phrase. And unfortunately I'm the chairman of our special programs committee, so I have the honor of introducing him." She seized the first of the little old-fashioned chairs which she intended restoring, and fell to work with vicious energy. " And it *isn't* an honor! "

This time Elen did giggle. " You poor dear. But it isn't your fault if he bores the school ——"

Sally plunged a brush into the black paint. " He won't! Mother heard him give the scene of the night Washington heard Benedict Arnold had turned traitor. She said he was marvelous. But as a person—*ugh!* " Sally shuddered and then took to applying her paint in silence. Elen waited, and when no further explanations seemed to be forthcoming, ventured, " Aren't you going to tell me any more? "

" No."

" But Sally, what is so awful about him? "

" Sorry."

" Oh," said Elen.

Sally worked on grimly, and once more silence hovered over the room, broken by the sharp swirl of the sleet against the panes and the sound of the wind down the little chimney. After a particularly mournful wail Sally dropped her brush, shivered and bit her lip.

" Len, how do you ever stand it? You must hear it all the time—and—and we've been having so much of it ever since you came."

" The wind? " Elen was genuinely surprised. " Why—why, I think I like it—it sounds like bugles and bagpipes and things exciting! "

A really savage blast tore around the house, and Elen thought she saw Sally shiver again. " Exciting!—I hate it! It seems to me it's been wailing like this ever since—well —all winter. Oh, I know I'm getting babyish ——" Her voice trailed away, and she lapsed into one of the queer silences that Elen had noticed so often in the past few days. She attacked her work glumly, and Elen was wondering how to relieve the gloom when the telephone sent out a sudden, incisive summons, and Sally leaped to her feet. " Don't let Sheba muddle these paints while I'm gone! " she begged.

Elen's fingers stroked the warm morsel of silver-black fur perched atop her left shoulder, and grinned as she always did when she saw how consciously the six weeks old Persian kitten seemed to pose. " You're much too royal to be inquisitive about paint cans, aren't you, Sheba? " she inquired, sinking her fingers into the soft baby fur. " Sheba, what's been happening to Sally? '"

There was no denying it. Something was very wrong about Sally. She was too bright. She tried too hard to be gay. Her moods changed with an abruptness which wasn't at all like the cousin Elen remembered. And now her remarks about the wind —— Once, at Pakawake, Sally and Elen, Larry Peel and another boy had essayed the climb up Mount Castor, and halfway to the summit they had been overtaken by a violent afternoon storm. It was an experience worth having, and Elen was always glad she had witnessed it, but she'd cringed more than once at the nearness of the hissing darts of lightning and the angry swirls of wind. And Sally—it had been Sally who stood upright against her protecting rock, pushed the wet hair out of her eyes and laughed outright, crying exultantly: "Oh, I love it! I love it! I'm glad we're here!" No, the Sally of Lake Pakawake had not been a girl who cowered at the sound of a northeast wind!

There were other changes too. In all the Herricks. Elen had been in Meredith three weeks now, and gradually she had become aware of an uncomfortable difference in the whole family. Uncle Billy *was* glad to have her there, and showed it, but somehow he was worried and disturbed, and there were times when Elen thought Aunt Claire's eyes held a stricken expression. Also she was sure that the impulsive Tommy had been checked and sidetracked when he was about to make an excited remark.

But the difference showed most of all in Steve. At Pakawake Steve had been a whimsical person, gay, teasing, straightforward and athletic, delighting in tennis and swimming by day and in the evening turning to his battered 'cello. Steve was perfectly matter-of-fact and without conceit about it, but it was no secret that his ambition to bring out all the secrets a 'cello held really was a passion with him.

The Steve Elen had seen during her first three weeks at the Herrick home was a boy who seemed to go about with a shrugged shoulder, a defiant toss of his blond head and hard lines about his mouth. When she asked about his 'cello he said curtly he was too busy to play. He looked as though he'd received a blow which had shocked and hurt him, and he was trying to show the world that he didn't care.

And it was strangest of all how solitary he seemed. Sally had introduced a few of her friends to Elen, but Steve appeared to be a lone wolf, leaving the house alone, returning alone, which, to anyone who had been at Pakawake, and seen the cabin overflowing with Sally and Stephen's guests, was undeniably queer.

"What's become of your side-kick?" she asked Steve one day.

"Meaning who?"

"Larry Peel. I thought he lived in Meredith."

"Oh"—Steve shrugged—"he's somewhere. I'm too busy driving the Kay-Bee truck and trying to keep out of mischief to fool around with Larry or anybody else."

Elen had looked at him thoughtfully. She knew he was a driver for the Kay-Bee Grocery Company after school hours, but it certainly didn't cut him out of doing everything else. And it was wholly unlike Steve to be so ungracious.

But except for that vague sense of some mysterious trouble, Elen was happier this year than she had dreamed she could be. She still had a little tingle of excitement when she opened her eyes in the morning and caught sight of the view from her large windows—the long reaches of snow-covered lawn and gentle terraces, with the tall evergreen trees keeping watch over the sleeping garden. She reveled in the beauty of the room with its woven rugs and quaint, old-fashioned furniture. Perhaps she was especially grateful for the tiny kitchen into which her bed could be wheeled for the day! It was amazing what a difference being out of bed could make in your feelings! Now that she was promoted to a chaise-longue during the day, and the hospital bed was shut out of sight, she felt far more self-respecting, and she certainly was stronger. The chaise-longue had been equipped with wheels, and Allan had given permission for her to go all over the first floor.

Uncle Billy had arranged for her to be tutored by the teachers from the Samuel Howe High School, and Elen began to feel she was really a human being again. Aunt Claire had been right. She could do a surprising number of things. Really useful things. Like typing the reports Uncle Billy brought home from his office, and checking the laundry lists with Aunt Claire. And dishes—Elen grinned to herself. To think of being thrilled because you had wiped a few dishes! But even though Uncle Mark happened to discover a lost city in Tibet it could give him no more of a thrill than wiping those first few dishes had given Elen!

Sally returned from the telephone with pursed lips. She settled herself and deftly began to restore a faded plum on a ladder-back chair. " There went my last hope."

Elen sighed. " Sally, you've got me all befuddled today! You sound so unfinished! Would you oblige a bewildered person with a simple answer? Your last hope of *what?* "

Sally obliged. " Of side-stepping the very great ' honor ' of introducing Mr. Eustace Hathaway Britten in assembly tomorrow. I asked Miss Webb—she's our faculty advisor—if it wouldn't be a better idea to have Lyle Ireland do it. Lyle's the president of the History Club. She said she'd think it over. And she phoned just now that she'd decided it was really my duty and not Lyle's. I argued as long as I dared, and all at once she said, ' You have my decision, Sally. You are wasting my time now. Good afternoon.' Well, be it on her own head if things go wrong! " Sally gave her brush a vicious wipe.

" Let me see—this charming gentleman is a ——"

" Don't honor him with the word gentleman," cut in Sally bitterly.

Elen stared again at her hot-cheeked cousin. This was something more than dislike and prejudice of a conceited person.

" For Pete's sake, Sally, what *is* this awful creature? "

" I told you: He presents Revolutionary heroes to ——"

" Yes, I know. And he's self-righteous and meddling. But what you didn't say is *what* he's been meddling with, lately."

" No, I didn't, did I? "

" You certainly did not! And I'm waiting."

Sally gathered up her paints and brushes. " The light's too bad now," she said sweetly. " I'll have to wait until tomorrow to finish even that plum."

Elen made an exasperated sound. " Sally, will you please come here? My fingers just itch to shake you."

Sally obediently rose and strolled over to the chaise-longue.

" You mean you'd rather be shaken than tell me? "

Sally grinned and nodded. Whereupon Elen covered her face with her hands and moved her head feebly. " Go away," she moaned. " You're not a cousin—you're a stone wall! "

Elen had a bout with pain that night. The doctors had warned her she would have plenty of discomfort as the injured cartilage responded to treatment. She lay in the dark, listening to the sharp tattoo of the sleet and the song of the wind as it came down the little chimney, first low and muted, then rising on a high, shrill note, like the sound of bagpipes, and wondered what had happened to make Sally hate the sound of wind. Sally, who surely was not a coward!

And then she thought of the unknown Mr. Eustace Hathaway Britten, " the most cocksure, self-righteous, meddling prig the State ever possessed." Who was he and how could he have meddled with the Herricks? Was his " meddling " the cause of the change in Steve—and all the rest of the family? Sally's dislike was positively bitter. And Sally was such a friendly soul.

Gradually both the pain and the sounds of the storm lessened, and when Elen opened her eyes again the beauty of the wintry day made her gasp. The sky was that azure blue which only follows snow or sleet. Icicles festooned her window ledges and broke into a dozen colors where the sun touched them. Even the ice-crusted snow was ashimmer with light. So glorious a day and Elen must be shut away from it all! Her breath came sharply and her hands went to her throat, and then she was giving Sally a wavering grin as she came in to say good morning before she set out for school.

" Good luck! "

Sally looked grim. " I can't expect it—not today, but thanks."

Something about Sally's face haunted Elen all day. Sally was going to that assembly in real dread. But apparently Mr. Britten was only going to dramatize one or two Revolutionary heroes! What on earth *was* this mystery between the Herricks and Mr. Britten? More than once she opened her lips to ask Aunt Claire, and then closed them again.

For the first time since she had been in Meredith the hours dragged by with lagging feet until the time she could look for Sally's return. And when her cousin's gaily clad figure did appear around the corner of Magnolia Avenue Elen saw she had a companion. Two hands waved a salute. For just a minute she didn't recognize the boy, and then involuntarily her fingers closed so tightly around Sheba that the kitten gave a frightened cry.

Sally was looking queer and white, but she spoke brightly: " Want a visitor, Len? Here's Larry Peel. You may not recognize him without Bucephalus! "

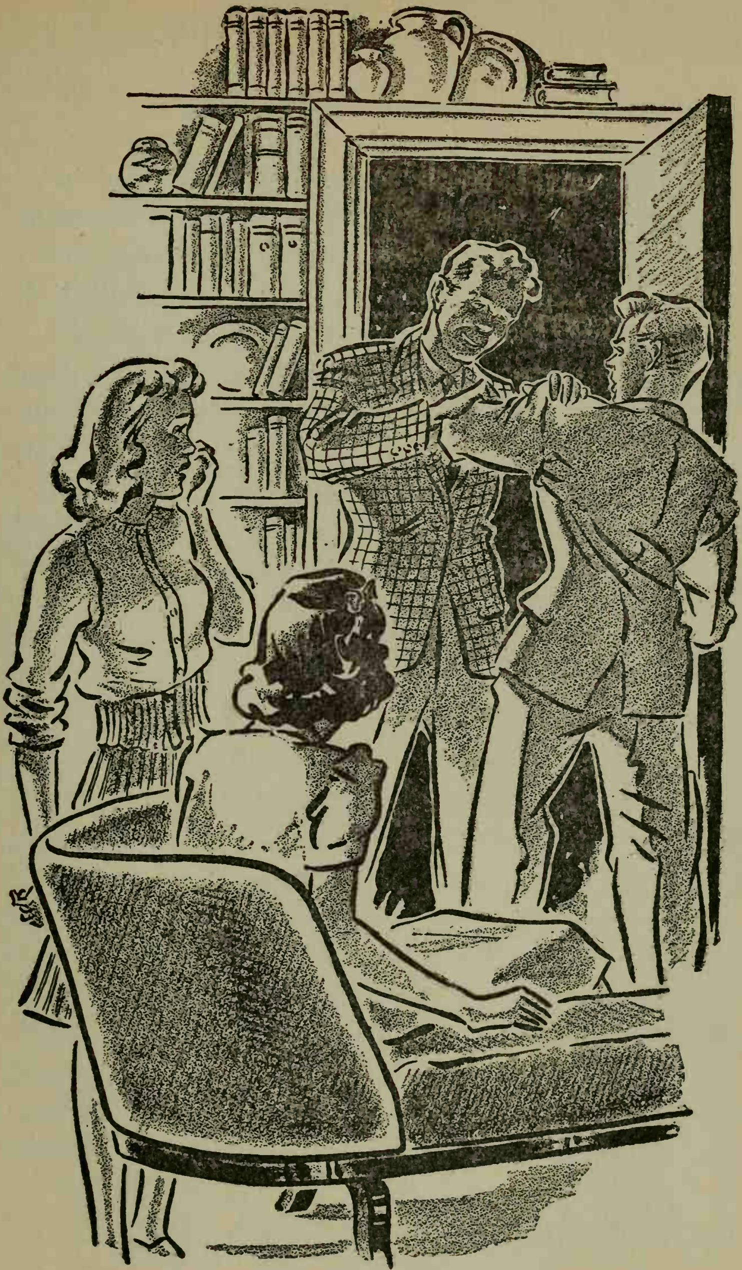
Elen was not at all sure that she did want this visitor. She hadn't minded meeting the two or three girls Sally brought in so much—they hadn't known the Elen Herrick of six months ago. But this tall, lithe boy, with his copper hair and the mischievous smile deep in his blue eyes, was a very different matter. It was he who had shared her interest in photography at Pakawake, and introduced her to horseback riding. And those early morning rides were not things to forget. When you canter over country roads, pick your way cautiously along a mountain trail, hold yourself and your horse motionless in order not to startle a blue heron which has just alighted on the edge of the lake—or watch a boy release a baby fox from a trap, there is a subtle understanding formed between the two of you. And when the time comes for you to separate it is hard to accustom yourself to its lack.

But now, when Larry Peel was standing before her, Elen had a moment of desperate panic. She hated to have him see the quiet, almost immovable girl she had become. Oh, why had Sally brought him?

Then Larry was shaking his bright head. "She doesn't remember," he said ruefully; "you were right, Sally. I *should* have brought Bucephalus to identify me!"

There was no pity in his eyes, and suddenly Elen felt the same confidence she used to have when he pointed out a new trail and said, "Let's take it. You can do it." She held out both hands and cried with relief, "Oh, Larry, I *am* glad to see you. I began to think you didn't know there was such a family as the Herricks. Sit down, please. Did you buy your new camera? And did you get pictures of this storm?"

Larry grinned a bit ruefully. "No new camera. But I did rig up a new synchronizer. I'll bring the thing over sometime, if you like. Sure, I took pictures this morning.



Steve was stalking toward the door when
Larry blocked his way.

Ought to be good. And the reason —— Oh, hello, Steve, you old egg!"

Steve had entered the room with an armload of wood. When he saw who was there he gave an unintelligible grunt, deposited the wood and was stalking toward the door when Larry blocked his way.

"Steve! Snap out of it! *You* know you didn't do it. *I* know you didn't do it. Don't be a poor fish for the rest of your life. May I come over for a little ping-pong tonight?"

The look on Steve's face was stony enough to daunt the friendliest soul. He said stiffly: "Better stay away. I'm not a proper companion for anyone, and I wouldn't be in a mood for ping-pong tonight."

Larry glared at him. "Proper companion!" he howled. "Proper companion! Oh my eye! That settles it. I'm coming. Do you hear me? I'm coming, and you'd better *get* into a mood. Because you're *going* to play ping-pong!"

Steve folded his arms and tried to look cold, and Larry, every copper wave standing up, actually shook his fist at him. The aghast and dumbfounded Elen wondered what was to come next. The thing that happened was the violent slamming of the front door, and the voice of Tommy Herrick raised in an anguished shout calling for his mother. Looking through the door into the distant hall, Elen saw Aunt Claire gathering a battered, shivering, bareheaded small boy in her arms. She could not hear her question, but Tommy's answer came in a desperate wail no one could miss:

"Sure I had a fight! With Jerry Parsons. But, Mother, listen: Jerry says his brother said Mr. Britten told the high school this morning that Steve had 'mislaid' Miss Page's old silver bowl. And we've *got* to do something about it quick! Because Jerry says his brother says Steve didn't mislay it—he—he ——" The last words came with a burst of sobs, "His brother says Steve *stole* it! And he never did!"

4

Design for Trouble

SOMEONE—it must have been Sally—made a broken little sound. Elen saw Steve's face go white and rigid, and then he was blindly trying to push Larry out of the way as he stumbled toward the door. But Larry refused to be pushed. His hold on Steve's arm was firm.

"You can't dodge your Uncle Larry any longer. If you're going to behave like an ostrich, you'll have company. Now come on out of here."

He propelled Steve out of the room and Sally closed the door behind them. Then she stood with her back against it, making a valiant effort to smile at her cousin with lips that quivered.

"Nice melodramatic scene, wasn't it?"

For the life of her Elen had no answer.

Sally let go of the doorknob to which she had been clinging, walked stiffly over to the fireplace, pretended to rearrange the logs, and then dropped down upon one of the little chairs and rested her chin in her cupped hands.

"Just the right time of day for a nice, weird little mystery story," she said in that queer, strained little voice which wasn't Sally's at all. " Remember the ones we used to tell at Pakawake the week it rained every day? Well, just cuddle up and get prepared, because you're going to hear the Baffling Tale of the Disappearing Christening Bowl ——"

" Sally! Please don't tell me anything you'd rather ——"

Sally's head came up with a quick gesture. " But I *do* want to tell you. I want you to have the straight story. We knew you'd have to hear it sooner or later, but—oh, I suppose we were hoping the thing would straighten itself out, and it did seem a shame to spoil your first month here with our tale of woe." Now her nervous hands went about her knees. " Well—we'll begin. Of course you know Steve has been driving one of the trucks for the Kay-Bee Grocery. Not that he cares about truck driving, but he does need a new 'cello if he's going to the Music Institute next year, and that was the first thing that turned up. Well, one Saturday night last month Miss Hortense Page stopped him just as he'd left her neighbor's. She's a queer, glum thing who brags that she's suspicious of everybody in the world. But for some reason she always liked Steve. She'd smile and talk to him right in the middle of glaring at everyone else. And that Saturday night she ran after him and begged him to do her a favor. She said she was going out of town to visit relatives. Her train left in half an hour. She had just remembered her precious Paul Revere silver christening bowl. It had been given to her great-grandfather by Paul Revere himself, she told Steve, and it was worth two thousand dollars. She always kept it in her room, but she was scared to leave it there now, and of course it was too late to take it to the bank—Saturday night, you know. And as it happened her lawyer was out of town. So she was asking Steve to take care of it until Monday when Mr. Kennedy would be home. Well, Steve couldn't see himself delivering grocery orders with one hand and clutching a two-thousand-dollar silver bowl with the other, and he said he wouldn't do it. But the next thing he knew Miss Page had pushed the bowl into his hands and run back and locked her door. She wouldn't open it again, just called to him from a window, ' Mind you take good care of it, Stephen! Remember you're the one person I trust! ' "

Sally swallowed and gave all her attention to the fire. Then:

" Of course if Steve had done the right thing he'd have hurried that bowl to police headquarters, but—oh, it's terribly easy to know the *right* thing to do after you've committed the *wrong* one! Steve couldn't think what to do. He didn't want to bring the thing here because, as it happened, the weather was so perfect and unusually warm that the rest of the family had gone down to Pakawake for the week end. Steve was coming down that night, but he didn't fancy the idea of traveling with a Paul Revere christening bowl, and he had to do *something* with it, so he took it to a cousin of ours, Anne Springstead. Probably you've never heard of her, she's a cousin on the Rodney side—Springstead is her husband's name. He asked Anne to ' bury the bowl deep until Monday.' That would have been all right, but then he had to be flippant and say ' If you give me a hint where you hide the loot I might be able to snitch it and by Monday you'd see me and a new 'cello enrolled in the Music Institute!'

"He thought Anne looked queer and when Steve turned he saw that Mr. Eustace Hathway Britten was in the library. Don't ask me why he was there, I wouldn't know.—No"—she forestalled the question as Elen's lips moved—"please don't interrupt and ask 'For pity sakes, *who is* this Mr. Britten?' I'll come to him in a few minutes, but I want to dispose of this wretched bowl business first. But he was exactly the person who *should not* have heard Steve make that silly remark.

"Now you probably won't believe what I'm going to say next, Len, and I admit it does sound incredible, but it happens to be the plain truth: That very night Anne was in an automobile accident on her way to a party. She had a slight concussion. It wasn't a very serious one, but"—Sally's hands suddenly went out in a characteristic gesture—"Anne hasn't remembered from that moment where she put the bowl."

"Oh—oh, no!" Elen's breathless exclamation was unbelieving.

"Oh—oh, yes! And now here comes the worst kink in the whole business: When she came to herself, and realized what had happened, she said to her nurse, 'I'm so glad I took that bowl back to Steve.' And when Steve went to see her she told him the same thing: That she'd brought it back to him. But she never did. She couldn't, possibly, because Steve worked at the Kay-Bee until nine o'clock that night, and then took the bus direct for Centertown—where we get the boat for Pakawake, you know. And

Anne had her accident an hour before. So that angle's impossible. It was just a trick of the shock she had. She admits it herself. But that doesn't help Steve now. And she certainly took Steve's advice about burying it deep! Have we ransacked her house—all of us! Not a bowl anywhere. And it just has to be! "

" And of course Miss Page ——" Elen could see all the miserable possibilities.

" Yes, of course! " agreed Sally bitterly. " If that woman had only taken Mr. Kennedy's advice—he's Miss Page's lawyer. Daddy and Steve went to him at once, of course, and he was awfully nice. Really he was. He said Steve certainly was not to blame, and couldn't be held responsible, because first of all he's a minor, and he had taken the bowl against his will. And then he said the wisest thing to do would be to keep quiet about it. The bowl had been mislaid, and it would turn up again. But apparently Miss Page had different ideas. I'm not sure how she did it, but within a week after she reached home practically the entire town knew that Stephen Herrick had lost her Paul Revere christening bowl! Worth two thousand dollars, and the only valuable thing she had! The one person she had trusted, and he had been false to his trust. And then to add trouble to trouble, Mr. Britten ' felt it his duty ' to repeat Steve's silly remark about ' snitching ' the bowl and getting himself a new 'cello with the proceeds. And you can believe me, Mr. Britten knows how to tell a good story! "

Elen's slender fingers had been digging into her palms, a habit she had developed during her first painful weeks at St. Luke's. Now she cried out fiercely: " Oh, no! How could anyone do such a despicable thing? "

Again Sally's shoulder went up in that quick shrug. " Well, he certainly did it. And now here comes something that's definitely queer—the whole thing's queer enough, but this is the queerest: Leslie Bradstreet—her family lives directly opposite—says that she saw Steve run in here early in the evening and then hurry away again. And Steve *wasn't* here from the time he left at eight in the morning. But Leslie's such a correct, precise person that you can't imagine her making a mistake. And she isn't the kind of girl to start a story like that—out of —well, meanness or wilfulness. She must have seen *something!* Now isn't that a nice complication? "

The whole business sounded more and more like a nightmare. No wonder Steve the debonair, Steve of the quixotic impulses, eager, quicksilver Steve had changed to Steve the morose, Steve the defiant.

How could anyone, knowing Stephen Herrick at all, anyone who had seen the fine, honorable spirit in his clean-cut face and steadfast grey eyes, even have so much as harbored the thought that he might have—might have ——

And still Sally was going on in that determined, breathless voice: " While I'm on the subject, you might as well hear everything: You know Daddy is the Curator of the Reid Historical Museum in the city? Well, about six weeks ago his portfolio was stolen and he'd been carrying some very valuable papers which he'd been using for a lecture. Detectives located them last week, but the story leaked out, and you can see how it would enhance the Herrick reputation! "

Yes, Elen did see, very clearly. No wonder the whole family had seemed " different " !

Sally reached over to the wood-basket and placed a fresh log on the fire with great care. " Cheerful story, isn't it? " she inquired. " But at least now you know why we've been such a Doctor Jekyll–Mr. Hyde family—nice in Pakawake and horrid in Meredith."

Elen choked. When she could trust her voice she asked carefully: " Where and why does Mr. Britten come in on all this? "

The fire seemed to require a great deal of attention. " Why—I told you ——"

Elen shook her head. " No, you didn't. Not all of his part."

For the first time since she had begun her story, Sally really looked at her cousin. " How did you guess, Len? Well, then, listen: Mr. Britten is terribly keen about everything connected with the American Revolution. You should see his house. It must be like living in a museum! And I've told you about his hobby—' reviving Revolutionary heroes for young people of today.' He has a portrait of Franklin, and he is desperately proud of it. Asked Daddy to come and see it and tell him its value. And—well, Daddy and another man from the Museum, an expert, agreed it wasn't an original. Anyone might have been disappointed, but Mr. Britten was simply furious. I don't think he's been able to bear the sight of a Herrick since. Before that there was the business of the Rodney clock —— Oh, I know this is getting fearfully complicated, but do you know about the Rodney clock—the grandfather's clock in the hall? "

Elen shook her head.

" It belonged to Cæsar Rodney," Sally explained rapidly—" the man who took that wild horseback ride from Delaware to Philadelphia while he had a raging fever to vote for the Declaration, you know. Grandfather left the clock to Steve because he has the Rodney name—Stephen Rodney Herrick. And somehow Mr. Britten heard about it. Every time he came here to see Daddy about museum business, and he used to come quite often, he'd stare and stare at that clock, and you could see he really *craved* it. At first he asked Steve to sell it, and finally he nagged and hounded him about it, and at last Mr. Britten said, ' Very well, young man. I'll say no more—for the present. But someday you may be very glad to sell it.' "

Elen leaned forward and gasped. " But—but Sally, that was a threat! "

Sally nodded. " Yes, it always sounded so to me."

" Then—do you think ——"

The fair head moved slowly. " I promised to tell you what had happened, Len. I won't guarantee to tell you what I think. But Mother and Dad refuse to believe Mr. Britten could be guilty of—of anything mean. Daddy says he did what he did from a twisted sense of duty."

Twilight had crept into the room. The little fire gave the only light, and as the light touched Sally's cheek, Elen was suddenly aware how thin her cousin had become. Sally lapsed into silence, and there was a painful constriction in

Elen's throat. What could you say after hearing a story like that?

Finally, when the silence had grown too heavy to bear, she heard herself asking, "And what did Mr. Britten's sense of duty lead him to do this morning in assembly?"

Sally's head came up sharply. "Oh, he gave us an impersonation of Paul Revere waiting for the signal from the Old North Church." She spoke cautiously. "And much as I don't like the man, I have to admit he was good. He certainly ——"

"What else did he do?"

"What makes you think he did anything else?"

"Well," Elen's voice was patient, "I did hear Tommy's wails, you know."

"Oh! Why—after he finished giving us Paul Revere, Mr. Britten reminded us that he—Paul Revere, I mean, had been a silversmith. And he said there had been a beautiful example of his work owned by a resident of Meredith until a short time ago, when it had ah—unfortunately been lost by a person to whom it had been intrusted for a short space."

Now Elen was sitting almost upright, her hands clenched, her voice low and furious. "Sally!—He said *that* —when *you* had been the person to present him, and Steve was in assembly? Oh, how *dared* he?"

Sally made no answer. She was sitting very still, her head dropped on her arms.

"Sally—how—how do your friends feel? Oh, but they can't think ——"

"I—don't—know!" Sally's voice was dragging and muffled. " I don't think they believed just at first that Steve had anything to do with the bowl's disappearance, but then Steve got so queer—so stiff and hard and horrid—you saw the way he acted with Larry. He's cut all his friends, and the only thing he'd do was to go to orchestra practice. Loris Kieth told me all he did there was to follow the business of the rehearsal and sit like an Indian. If anybody speaks to him he grunts. If he would only throw back his head and grin, he'd muddle through somehow, but he just won't."

No, Elen realized that Steve wouldn't—perhaps couldn't. Underneath his old-time gay nonchalance was a sensitive something which had been deeply and bitterly hurt. It was terrible enough for all the other Herricks, but they would contrive to fight their way through. But Stephen ——

" Anne might have gone out and tossed the thing into the river for all the trace it's left," Sally said dully. " We've almost taken her house apart board by board—and it wasn't a particle of use. Yes, and after Leslie's story we ransacked this house from attic to furnace-room. That bowl just isn't anywhere."

Elen had no answer for that.

Darkness took complete possession of the room before Sally spoke again. " Len? "

Elen had to conquer the thing that was twisting at her throat before she succeeded in answering " Yes? "

" There's just one thing more, and then you *will* know everything there is to know about us: The reason Steve was home so early this afternoon was because the Kay-Bee people told him yesterday they couldn't use a boy who—who had Steve's reputation.—Oh—Len! It *was* selfish of us to drag you away from St. Luke's into this awful mess! "

5

Larry Takes a Hand

EIGHT minutes past three. Elen looked glumly from her watch to the open geometry book in her lap and then wadded her ninth answer to today's problems and sent the ball into the fire. Miss Prentiss from Samuel Howe High School was due at three-thirty to help Elen brush up on her French and geometry, and Elen's mind seemed determined to be an absolute void on both subjects. One of the sheets from her pad had fallen to the floor and lay just beyond her reach. It was an important sheet, too. She made a little despairing sound as her fingers barely failed in touching it, and straightened slowly to find a tall figure clad in a lumber-jacket grinning at her from the door. Elen jumped.

" Ugh—oh—Larry! "

Larry bowed deeply. " So the girl really deigns to notice that she has a visitor? I was about to tiptoe away and leave you to the delights of your geometry."

" Did I look so delighted? "

" We-ll, I'd never seen you sunk in study before, so I wouldn't know how the process affected you. I ran over to pick up Steve's skis and to tell Mrs. Herrick that he's having dinner with us. She said I could stray in here while she got his things. I brought the pictures I did of the storm yesterday, but perhaps they'll crack up your train of thought ——"

" It needs to be cracked! " confessed Elen. " Larry, *who* do you suppose decided to plague the world with mathematics? Whoever it was certainly deserved the most horrible tortures, and I hope he got them! "

Larry surveyed her with disapproving unbelief in his expressive face. His voice was deep and solemn in its incredulous disappointment.

" And I thought you were a really intelligent person! You do not *like* to study mathematics? My dear girl, mathematics, in all its glory, is the chief point in education. All the great people of the world have reveled in mathematics! Anyone who doesn't appreciate it is feebleminded! " His tones swelled with enthusiasm.

Elen grinned. " 'Thank you, kind sir, she said.' "

" Quite all right," Larry waved his hand, " just a word of warning because I really like you, you know."

As he advanced to give her the photograph folder, he stooped and retrieved the sheet of paper which had been lying just beyond her reach, and since it was lying face uppermost, Elen knew he couldn't escape seeing what was drawn under her half-finished geometry problem. She flushed guiltily. What *had* possessed her to make that crude but quite unmistakably clear sketch?

It was a diagram, done in the form of a triangle, each point labeled with the names of the people who *might* have helped the silver bowl to disappear: Anne Springstead, Mr. Eustace Hathaway Britten, and Leslie Bradstreet. And worst of all, while she had only put question-marks above Britten and Bradstreet, she had placed an exclamation-point above the point which represented Anne!

Larry's face had grown keen and intent as he handed the paper to her and he watched silently while Elen twisted it into a quick hard ball and sent it flying into the fire.

" Oh, I should never have made that. It's horrid to even think that a cousin of Steve's might—but I haven't been able to stop thinking about the thing since last night. Uncle Mark taught me to make diagrams of my problems, but—oh, what must you be thinking of me? "

Larry's gaze was steady and very thoughtful. " I was thinking, ' Et tu, Brute? ' You see, I thought I had a patent on all such ideas about that particular person."

Elen sat almost straight in her excitement. " Larry! Do you really think ——"

One shoulder went up expressively; Larry's answering grin was rueful. " No—I don't *think* anything about this pretty mess. I only wonder. And just now I'm wondering why you included the third person? "

" Leslie Bradstreet?—Oh, just because Sally said she swore she saw Steve come home when he didn't. I don't know anything else about her, and I can't get a connection ——"

" The coupling-pin does seem to be lost," agreed Larry. " Wouldn't do any harm to remember Leslie though. She certainly saw *something*. I can't imagine an optical illusion trying to fool Leslie. When your windows are open you'll enjoy hearing her practice. Some people consider her the best musician Sam Howe ever had. 'Our brilliant young pianist,' as our principal says. She and Steve are both after the music scholarship Mr. Donaldson offers. The winner has two years at the Music Institute. Leslie's all set for it.'"

Elen gave him a startled look, but Larry's gaze was all innocence. He was opening the little folder containing his photographs, and selecting one, informed her, "These are the trees in the park, Len," which was his own oblique way of saying that he had finished with Leslie Bradstreet as a topic of conversation!

The photograph, showing a cluster of trees sheathed in glistening ice, set against a little hill so white and shining it reminded one of a fairy-tale, was a lovely thing; but Elen wasn't ready to give it her full attention. Anne had been a person who really was linked with the disappearance of the bowl. And she couldn't ask this of any of the Herricks:

"Larry—what kind of person *is* Anne Springstead?"

Larry cast a cautious glance at the door, made a grimace and lifted one eyebrow. "Why—she does well enough, I suppose. One of your fluffy-haired, fluffy-brained blondes. Perhaps I'm prejudiced because she flew off to California and left Steve to face the music alone. After all she *did* have the bowl last." At Elen's astonished stare he nodded, his mouth suddenly set in a hard line. "Oh well, the Herricks say she did everything there was to be done before she went—turned her house inside out, I hear, but ——"

" You mean—she's in California? " Elen demanded incredulously.

" Quite so. She had an accident, you know, and concussion, and then this excitement. Her husband decided she needed a trip to ' balance her nerves.' They left last Sunday. And up to the last she insisted she had given ——"

At Elen's quick signal he handed her another picture. " Here is something which is going to make Sally beside herself with joy! "

By careful placing of two different mirrors the Herricks had contrived to give Elen a view of the hall with its stair-landing and the tall clock at the foot of the stairs. It was easy for her to see Aunt Claire as she reached the lowest stair. Following the inclination of Elen's head, Larry saw her too, and was on his feet offering the photograph he had just shown Elen.

" Wouldn't you call this a good study of Sally, Mrs. Herrick? I'm going to make a special enlargement for her as a surprise."

Aunt Claire looked at the picture of a very much amazed young person who was reclining in a snowbank, one ski plowing the snow beneath her and the other pointed to the sky at a rakish angle; and her lips twitched. Sally had an enviable reputation for being good at any sport she tried, and her expression of disgusted surprise really was ludicrous.

" And I'm going to call it ' The Expert of Seven Dip Hill Executes a New Landing,' " Larry commented with relish. " Steve's things are here, Mrs. Herrick? "

The roll Aunt Claire had made of Steve's skiing outfit was compact. " His skis are in his room," she observed; " you can run up for those yourself. Happy landings, Larry! "

The boy grinned. He looked regretfully in Elen's direction. "Thanks! I'd like to ask you to come too. You could use my sister Nan's skis—no good to her at that southern college of hers. But I hear you have a date with Miss Prentiss and I suppose you feel obliged to keep it? "

Had Larry said " Too bad you can't come," Elen thought she would have howled. Instead she shook her head ruefully.

" Y-yes, I'm afraid so. Uncle Mark dinned it into me that school teachers' schedules are things to be treated with great awe and respect! "

Neither Aunt Claire nor Larry must guess how nearly these snapshots had been her undoing. They had brought on an aching wave of nostalgia for everything that winter had always meant to her: The sharp, stimulating breath of the cold wind—the queer feeling of kinship she had with a snowstorm—the thrill of racing over smooth ice beneath a sky so blue it held violet tones. And the white hills of Uncle Mark's New Hampshire farm! When she was there last Christmas vacation Elen had learned the ecstasy and exultation which comes only to those who go forth on skis. To have flown down snow-crowned slopes, dared to leap over an embankment and have the thrill of a successful landing—to have done all that, and this year be a prisoner cut off from all winter adventure ——

Elen drew an unsteady breath and managed to smile gallantly at Larry. " Ask me the next time, please," she entreated, but perhaps it was just as well that the doorbell's sharp peal announced Miss Prentiss' arrival.

Elen was right about the state of her mind. Miss Prentiss was generous with her patience and help, but geometry had never been a strong point with Elen, and she shocked even herself by the appalling blunders she made in French. By the time the afternoon was over she was certain Miss Prentiss was convinced she was an utter moron!

She sighed comically as Sally returned from seeing Miss Prentiss to the front hall. " Oh, Sally, I can just see the thoughts going round and round in that poor woman's head: ' And I've always thought of the Herricks as such a clever family! I wonder if this poor child has always been so dumb or if it's the result of her accident? ' I know she thinks I belong somewhere in the vicinity of the third grade! "

Sally smiled a little absently, and as the clear, full-toned clock in the hall struck five times, she said with quick satisfaction: " Larry must have done it. If he hadn't, Steve would surely have been home by this time."

" I do enjoy the way you begin your remarks in the middle nowadays! " Elen commented.

Sally laughed a little. " Larry was going to waylay Steve after orchestra practice," she explained, " and egg him into going over to Seven Dip Hill—that's where we ski—and then take him home for dinner."

" ' Waylay ' ? " Elen sat straight to demand. " You mean that Larry came over here and gathered up Steve's skis and things, and told Aunt Claire Steve was invited to the Peels' for dinner, when Steve didn't know anything

about it?—And Larry wasn't sure he could get Steve to *go?"*

Sally nodded. "They probably had a fight about it. Steve hasn't gone anywhere or done anything for a month. Said he couldn't, while he was driving the Kay-Bee car, but ——" She shrugged. "So Larry decided to kidnap him if it was necessary. Larry's used to Steve. Really, about once every six months Steve needs to be picked up and have the moodiness shaken out of him—and it's usually Larry who does it." She dropped to the floor, leaned her fair head against the arm of the chaise-longue, and fell silent, watching the deep blue shadows creep over the snow-swept terrace. Finally, without moving, she asked, "Len?"

"Yes?"

"There was something I forgot to tell you last night when I was divulging the family mystery. I remembered it today, and I'd like you to know it, because—oh—it might make you think better of Steve ——"

"It couldn't!" said Elen firmly, and paid no attention to Sally's gasp. "Because I think Steve's a grand person just as he is. Nothing anybody said could make any difference!"

"Oh!" Sally's voice sounded very small and choked. "*Oh-h!*" Elen carefully looked out toward the hall while her cousin gulped. Then a swift kiss dropped on Elen's forehead, and Sally had settled back and was picking up her story.

"I told you about the clock, you know. Belonging to Steve because he has Rodney as his middle name. And it really is awfully valuable. Well, Steve wants to sell it, and turn the money over to Miss Page. But Mother and Daddy both object. In the first place they're positive the bowl will turn up some day, and for another thing, no court would hold Steve responsible. And—and—perhaps this sounds absurd, but all of us love that clock. But they've given him permission to do what he pleases if the mystery isn't cleared up within six months."

It was strange what a sickening sensation Elen had at the idea of the Rodney clock being sold. Until three weeks ago she had never seen it, but now—why, it was part and parcel of the Herrick family! Tall, much more slender than most grandfather clocks, its mahogany case shone rich and dark, gleaming with the care of years. Severely simple in design, the pillars on either side of the door were carved to represent a pineapple, and three brass finials which crowned the headpiece were perfectly plain. Yet somehow you knew here was a very aristocrat of clocks, and its voice was what you would expect—clear, bell-like and vibrant.

It was its singularly lovely sound in striking the hours which had first made Elen aware of the clock. For a week or so after leaving St. Luke's, her nights had been troubled and uncomfortable, and although Elen would not confess it even to herself, she missed the watchful attention of the nurses. Aunt Claire slept on a cot in the next room, waking at the least sound, so Elen had learned to be discreet about her restlessness. It was then she had grown conscious of the clock, calling the hours, like a friendly voice through the night. She learned to wait for it to speak again, in token that something was keeping the dark vigil with her.

Even in daylight the clock really seemed possessed of a distinctive personality. She could see it at full-length in her mirror, facing the door like a welcoming sentinel. There had been times, even here, chiefly when she was alone, when pain nagged her and doubts about her recovery rose up to besiege her. Somehow it was the sight of the Rodney clock which brought her back to steadiness. Surely Sally hadn't meant that Steve was considering selling—and yet—was a clock—*any* clock worth more than one's reputation for honesty? Elen bit her tongue on her protests. No wonder Steve looked desperate!

When Sally broke the silence she had changed the subject. " Perhaps you've been wondering why you haven't met our cousin—the one I told you about last night, Anne Springstead? " she observed.

" Why—yes, I did, rather." Elen saw no reason for mentioning the information Larry Peel had given her.

" Her husband thought all this excitement was bad for her after her accident, so he's taken her to California."

" Bad for *her?* " Elen said it under her breath, but Sally was quick to hear and leap to Anne's defense.

" Anne's all right, Len Herrick! You're not to think—she simply forgot where she put that old bowl. She really worried herself sick trying to remember."

Whatever opinions Elen might have regarding Anne Springstead were better kept to herself. After all, it would be as impossible for Sally to think Anne had deliberately stolen a silver bowl as it was for Elen to believe Steve had been the guilty person. She hurried to make amends.

" It must have been simply horrid for all of you! Is playing his 'cello at home one of the things Steve's stopped doing? I've been hoping and hoping he *would* bring it out and play for me. You know, two or three months ago, at the hospital, when things were pretty bad, I used to think, ' Oh, if only Steve would bring his 'cello and play *Traumerei* or *Tarantelle,* I could stand anything.' And once, in the middle of the night when my knee was thinking up new ways to entertain me, and Miss Smith asked me what I wanted, I said *' The Evening Star,'* and she said, so kindly, that Jupiter wasn't available just then! "

" You poor dear! " Sally said chokily.

" But Steve does play? "

" Oh, yes. But he's been keeping his 'cello at school lately. It really isn't an easy thing to carry when the weather's bad and the streets icy. And he had to stay in the school orchestra if he is going to be eligible for the musical scholarship this spring. Mr. Donaldson gives it for solo work, of course, but the person has to be active in all the musical work of his high school. And just now the orchestra's practicing for the State High School Orchestra Competition. That orchestra has been the one and only thing Steve would have anything to do with since—well, since this bowl business has had so much publicity. If he'd had his way he'd have become a hermit. And if Larry really succeeds in keeping him for dinner tonight it will certainly be a miracle! "

" Sally," Elen hesitated for a second and then plunged on, " if—I wasn't here, like—like this, wouldn't *you* be out on that Seven Dip Hill? Please don't miss everything because ——"

"Oh-h!" Sally's voice went up in righteous indignation. "So the lady doesn't like my company? Well! That can be arranged!" In one light movement she was on her feet. "I'll go and see if my own mother will appreciate my services more. But before I go, Miss Herrick"—she paused at the door and gazed haughtily at her cousin—"I'll tell you that skiing on a bare hill isn't one of my favorite sports, and Seven Dip Hill, like every other place, was entirely devoid of snow until three days ago. Has been for a month. However, I intend going tomorrow, so your mind can be relieved." With her chin at its highest angle, she sailed from the room.

Elen giggled a little. Sally understood. And Sally could meet anybody more than halfway. Sympathy Sally might have, but if there was any pity in her thoughts, she kept it well hidden.

The chaise-longue this afternoon had been placed where Elen could catch a glimpse of the distant dining-room on the other side of the hall. Now and then she could see Sally moving about, putting deft touches to the dinner table. The light made a halo of her very fair hair, but even at that distance the droop of her shoulders was all too evident. With Elen Sally tried to be the gay, light-hearted cousin she had known at Pakawake, but when she was alone ——

Ah, yes, Elen knew how it was when you were alone! You could let all your defences down, then.

Sally was bringing in the flowers for the table now.

That was a signal that dinner was ready. And Uncle Billy would be coming to wheel her out to dinner—oh, it was good to be a part of a family again, and eating in a regular dining-room! Never again, thought Elen, would she have a grain of patience with people who " loved the luxury of eating their meals in bed."

Botheration! The doorbell announced the Herricks had a guest. Uncle Mark had expressed very pointed opinions on guests who were inconsiderate enough to arrive at the dinner-hour. Probably someone come to hold a lengthy business consultation with Uncle Billy——

But the person who came into her view for just a minute was Allan Knight. He said a brief word to Sally, then disappeared. Oh, it couldn't be that anything had happened to Steve——

Ten minutes later he reappeared and strode through the rooms to her.

" Elen, are you a dyed-in-the-wool Herrick? Do you like music? "

" Why—oh—*yes!* " Even after three weeks' experience Elen still gasped at the amazing questions Allan Knight shot at her.

" If I were to prescribe an hour or so of piano music played by a good pianist, you wouldn't object? "

Elen only stared at him. Had Sally relayed her remarks about Steve and his 'cello——

" Well, then, beginning tomorrow, you will have special daily recitals. You'll enjoy them, too. And now, before you think I'm too badly cracked, I'll explain: One of your neighbors is in trouble because her family's quarantined for scarlet fever. She's had it, but they're taking no chances, so she is with her grandmother. But her grandmother has no piano, and it's rather important that she be able to practice just now, so I'm putting my finger in her pie. Mrs. Herrick is quite willing to have her play an hour or so each day, but since it's your room which will be invaded, I want to be sure you wouldn't object."

"Oh, I wouldn't!" Elen cried fervently. "I'd love it!"

"Then I think you'll see her tomorrow. She may seem a bit—well, frosty, at first, but you'll really enjoy her music. And I think you'll find yourself liking her, too. She's a real person underneath, but she hasn't been having a happy time lately."

Sally, standing in the doorway, sniffed. "You might tell Len the name of this paragon, while you're on the subject of her, Allan."

The gaze which Allan gave Elen was whimsical at first, and then steady and intent. "Her name," he said quietly, "is Leslie Bradstreet."

6

Musicians Have Power to Rouse the Savage Breast

THE approach of Elen's breakfast tray was heralded by the sound of Tommy's gruff little voice raised in indignation:

"*Some* crust, I'll say—coming in to use our piano —— Aw-w, I don't need to ssh. Elen's one of the family, isn't she?" Whereupon the door opened, and Tommy, flushed and scowling, stalked in, bearing Elen's breakfast tray at a precarious angle over his head, followed by a rather tight-lipped Sally.

"We're talking about Precious having the brass-plated nerve to want to practice on our piano," Tommy informed his cousin. "Yeah, I know! Mom invited her. Because Allan asked her to. What does he want Precious to do anyway? Walk off with that scholarship?"

Sally carefully adjusted the tray on its little legs. "Are you really afraid that if we let Leslie practice on our piano five or six times she'll be able to take the scholarship away from Steve?"

Tommy stared at her, and then his "*No!*" burst forth with such vehemence that the dishes on Elen's tray rattled as she jumped, and Sally's fingers went to her ears.

"Did you just arrive from the wilds of Borneo?" demanded his sister. "You sound like a wild man. Mother hasn't asked *you* to entertain Leslie, has she? Well, then, why all this fuss? Go eat your own breakfast, and let's see what effect orange muffins will have on your disposition!"

But something ailed Sally's own disposition this morning. She looked dispirited and out of sorts as she moved about the room, adjusting the shades for the day, idly changing the position of a candlestick or a bowl, and nervously touching one thing after another on Elen's desk. Finally she wheeled to meet Elen's speculating grey eyes.

"I do agree with Tommy," she said honestly; "for Leslie to bring herself to use our piano so she can go on with her practicing after accusing Steve of being here when he wasn't—well, it *does* seem pretty brazen to me—and I just can't get over Allan's asking the favor. My opinion of him is dropping by the minute. Well, the pleasure will be all yours this afternoon, Len. I won't be home."

"What does Aunt Claire say?"

Sally shrugged. "Oh—'Perhaps you'll find Allan has his reasons.' Perhaps he wants to try the effect of music on you, Len! Finished? I'll call Daddy and Steve."

Uncle Billy, when he and Steve came in to transfer her from the hospital bed to the chaise-longue where she spent the day, smiled at her, but his eyes were grave, and Steve looked oddly remote and indifferent, almost as though he were walking in his sleep. Certainly the painful tension, which had been a part of the Herrick atmosphere ever since Allan Knight's call the evening before, had not lessened with the arrival of morning. Only Aunt Claire seemed serene and unconcerned. She had formed the habit of doing as much work as possible in Elen's room, even preparing their light lunch in the adjoining kitchenette. It wasn't until they were enjoying the fluffy omelette and the crisp toast which popped from the toaster at Elen's side of the small table, that she even mentioned their expected guest.

" About Leslie Bradstreet, Len,—you know, she's coming to practice here this afternoon, and "—she looked across the table with the gentle straightforwardness her family loved—" I think you know how Sally and Steve and Tom feel about it. Sally says you know why. What Leslie actually saw none of us know, and she certainly reported it only from a sense of duty and not for any spite, poor child! Her father died when she was very young, and her mother wasn't in a position to take care of her, so she was handed over to her grandparents, two of the most uncompromising, rigid people I ever met. Something on the order of Queen Victoria's mother. And one of their pet ideas was that Leslie should report everything she and her friends did each day. Yes "—she nodded in sympathy as Elen made a little sound of pity and horror—" that's really hideous even to imagine, isn't it? But it did happen to Leslie, and it's a habit you can't break easily. You can imagine how popular it made Leslie with the girls and boys here. Then a year ago her mother married again and reclaimed her daughter. Mrs. Spafford's nice enough—but a bit too affectionate and anxious to see Leslie popular. And she calls the poor girl 'Precious.'"

Elen giggled a little and Aunt Claire's lips quirked in a wry smile. "Yes, I know. And I'm afraid the other young people in Meredith do not find Leslie so precious. She's been trained to be stiff and stand-offish and doubting. The one thing she has is her music. She'll do something pretty big with that some day. But what she needs now is someone to *like* her and to wake her up. She's never had a close friend in her life. Her grandmother told me that she had always kept a close watch on Leslie's friendships, and insisted that Leslie entertain her friends in her own home, so that she could 'check any undesirable influences.' Now her mother is trying to make up for her grandmother's tight rein by forcing Leslie to plunge into everything she hears the other girls in Meredith are doing, regardless of whether Leslie enjoys it or not. She's been shoved into camp, made to join the Bit and Bridle Club, and the dances her mother has given for her—can you imagine what they were like? With all the other young people convinced Leslie is a little prig and Leslie hurt and baffled, watching every one of her guests doing the things her grandmother had taught her were rude and wrong—there's misunderstanding on both sides."

Elen's omelette lay forgotten on her plate. Her throat was closed with an aching pity. Aunt Claire stood up and smiled a bit ruefully. "This wasn't exactly the conversation I like with my lunch—nor any other time, but I did want you to understand about Leslie. And I might as well add that she's coming here because her grandmother insisted she accept my invitation, and not because of her ' brass-plated nerve ' ! "

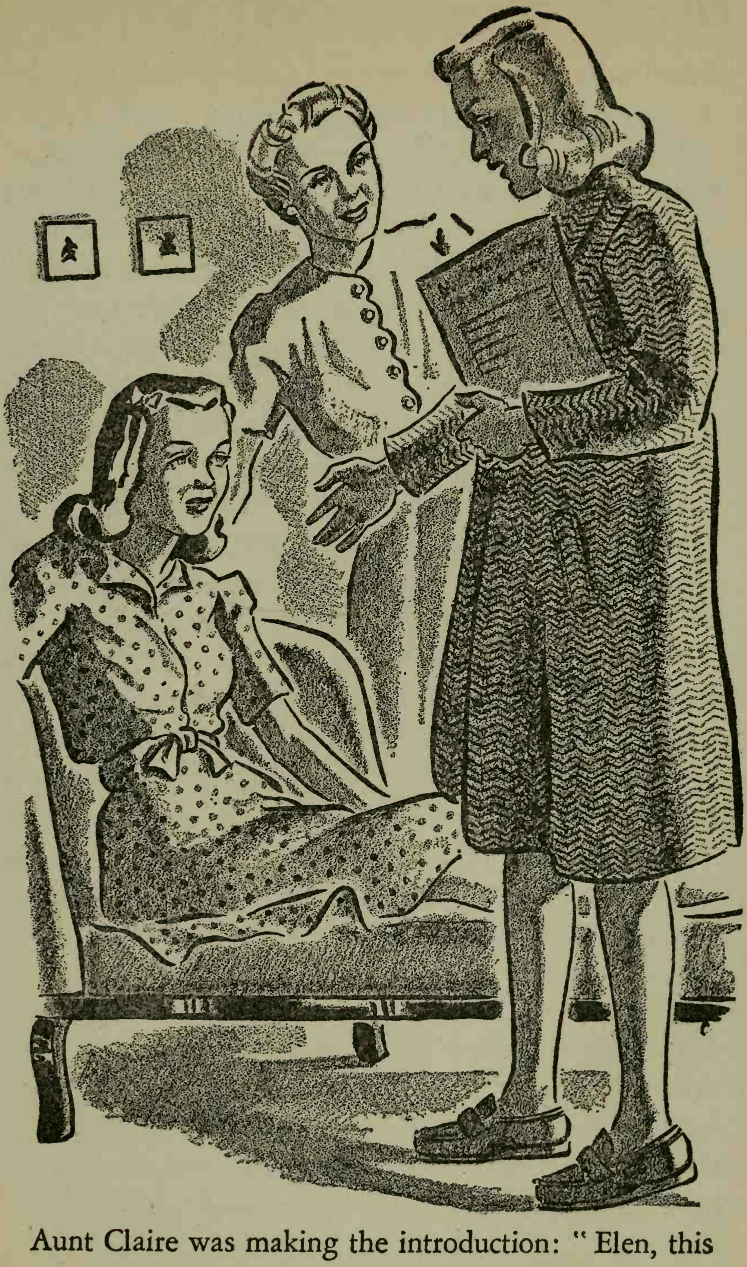
Elen giggled faintly, but her throat still felt constricted. It was queer how warped the finest things could become. Families, for instance. From the time she was a small girl she had known days when she would be assailed with desperate loneliness for a " real " family, days when she hated Uncle Mark's teaching because she knew it always came first in his thoughts. After her visit to the Herricks at Pakawake, she knew she would always want to be part of a family. But Leslie Bradstreet's life had been effectively tangled by too much family!

Well, Elen had encountered baffled and stand-offish people before. Herald College, small though it was, had been a good place to meet all varieties of the human species. Leslie couldn't possibly be any more sullen or apathetic or domineering than some of the Herald students.

But she did feel a prickle of excitement when the Herrick bell sent out its summons. This girl was one of the three people who had thrown suspicion upon Steve. And even Sally said you couldn't doubt her truthfulness! Then, watching the doorway, Elen suddenly felt as if all her ideas about Leslie Bradstreet were scattering to the winds.

Aunt Claire was making the introduction: " Elen, this is our next-door neighbor, Leslie Bradstreet. And Leslie, here is the newest addition to the Herrick clan. We were to have had her as a Christmas present, you know, but the best-laid plans of mice and men ——"

Elen hoped fervently that her jaw hadn't dropped too much! Why, oh, *why* hadn't it occurred to anyone to tell



Aunt Claire was making the introduction: " Elen, this is our next-door neighbor, Leslie Bradstreet."

her what Leslie really was like? Sally had said " precise ": Allan Knight's word had been " frosty," and her own mother called her " Precious " ! Elen had been prepared for a drab, uncertain, or perhaps a supercilious little person, but ——

Leslie Bradstreet was anything but drab or uncertain. Her heavy fair hair, the ends just curling against her blue collar, held silvery lights; the cool, wide-apart grey eyes, set under a high forehead, seemed indifferent. Her nose was long and perfect, her rounded chin was the most determined chin Elen had ever seen. A large girl, she just escaped being lumpish. She was uncompromisingly square-shouldered, and when she stopped before the chaise-longue she looked as though she might be rooted to the floor. And to crown it all, her mother called her " Precious " !

Elen swallowed her feelings and held out her hand. " Of course I'm sorry your brother has scarlet fever, but I am glad something brought you here! It's been so aggravating to be so near a piano and not hear a single sound out of it! "

Leslie's voice reminded Elen of one of the interns at St. Luke's—crisp and positive. " My stepbrother, you mean. And you're probably going to be disappointed this afternoon. I'm only running through my exercises and a little of the piece I'm working on. I'm warning you it will be tiresome."

" Oh, will it? What a shame you feel like that about your exercises! " Elen's sympathetic tone was very bland. " I lived next door to a professor of music,—he always told his pupils they could play even exercises with enthusiasm and feeling."

Did Aunt Claire make the faintest kind of a choking sound? Leslie certainly was startled into staring.

" One listener will be enough of an audience." Aunt Claire's voice was clear now. " I have other things to do. Enjoy the piano, Leslie! "

Once Leslie struck the keys Elen drew a breath of relief. She had been prepared for what Professor Feldbaumer called " a dunder und blitzen " effect, but Leslie's touch was delicate, firm, but light. Her fingers glided, and almost before they touched the keys, the melody answered. Perhaps, thought Elen, watching her, when she was at the piano she became the girl she really *wanted* to be. At any rate, her face lost its indifference, her eyes came alive. And under her fingers even the exercises seemed vivid little songs.

Then when she began the strong, slow, majestic chords of the *Pilgrim's Chorus* Elen surrendered completely. Before her ears returning pilgrims marched in solemn processional. It did not weaken the magic that she had heard it repeated again and again.

Then Leslie lifted her hands, closed her music, and stood up. Abruptly the spell was broken.

" Th-thank you! " Elen was a little ashamed of the suspicious shakiness of her voice. " I—I haven't heard anybody really play since I left Pakawake last summer. Sally says Steve keeps his 'cello at school, and poor Aunt Claire is just too busy. But I didn't know how much I'd missed it until just now. I'm so glad you live next door! "

Leslie's face was suddenly queer. "The rest of the Herricks aren't!"

Elen had no answer to that. She only lifted her chin and looked mildly inquiring.

"Oh, you needn't look so innocent!" The grey eyes were the color of Lake Pakawake before a storm. "Don't tell me Sally or Larry Peel missed a chance——" As though the subject was always uppermost in her mind, she cried defensively, "Oh, I know what they said! Larry calls me the Town Crier. But I *had* to do it! I *did* see Steve here that night! And it wouldn't have been right to conceal it!"

Only Uncle Mark would have known that when Elen spoke in that queer, gentle tone it was a sure indication she was very angry.

"How do you think Steve smuggled that cup away from Anne Springstead's?"

"I don't know. I didn't say he had it. But I *saw* him come here! He hurried in as if he was frightened, and then about ten minutes later he came out and went down Blake Avenue. I *saw* him!"

"I heard you the first time," Elen said softly, her eyes on the mirror which gave her the glimpse of the hall. "You needn't say it again—Aunt Claire happens to be coming."

Aunt Claire's observant eyes went from Leslie's quivering lips to Elen's hot cheeks. But she was not given to commenting on all she saw.

"The music was lovely, Leslie," she said with heartfelt sincerity. "It was good to have the piano played once more. You must certainly come often—the piano and Elen both need you. Elen looks more roused than I've seen her since she came to Meredith."

Leslie sent a peculiar side look at Elen. Elen saw the desperate appeal, but now suddenly she wanted to hurt this girl who had deliberately put Steve in such a difficult position. Her voice was very cool and casual: "Yes, do come. It's certainly interesting to know a person who is subject to hallucinations like yours!"

7

Elen Goes With Bowed Head

APPARENTLY it was no surprise to Sally when she returned from her excursion to Seven Dip Hill to find Elen in an unprecedentedly low frame of mind. She took one understanding look at the forlorn tilt of her cousin's head, cast her bright-colored Angora mittens over to the table and cuddled her cold cheek against Elen's.

"Poor lamb! Is she feeling limp and inferior, or just plain mad? It was mean of me to go cavorting over the Hill this afternoon and leave you to put up with the Bradstreet disposition alone. But if I'd met her here today I'm pretty sure there'd have been an explosion. You probably made a better impression without my help."

Remembering the stricken look which had leaped into Leslie's face, and the quiet disappointment in Aunt Claire's, Elen doubted it. Her tired voice was rueful. "Oh, I made an impression, right enough! I doubt if she missed you."

She turned her head away from Sally's inquiring eyes, and after a second Sally hugged her impulsively. "Perhaps I would have liked being here after all! What did ——"

" Why, for one thing I said it was interesting to know a person with hallucinations.—Oh, Sally, I never met anyone who inspired me to be so rude—and—and *hateful* before! "

" Are you," Sally asked feelingly, " trying to tell *me?* "

The amazingly sweet bird-whistle, which was Tommy Herrick's especial signal, floated in, and a minute later Tommy's rumpled mop of black hair was thrust around the doorframe. " Hi! Listen to the news—Aunt Serena's coming over tonight. She just phoned Mummy! " He grinned gleefully at the consternation in his sister's face. " Remember last time she was here? " Tommy folded his hands primly, and assumed an anxious tone of voice: " ' Steve, if you'd *only* brought that bowl to *me.* . . . Are you *sure* you always give people the correct change? And *do* be more careful when you're driving the Kay-Bee car. You waved your hand to me the other day. And on Lake Street! You need both hands in that traffic. Now ——' "

Sally's cool voice cut in. " Len's had one visitor today. So I think we'll just close the door, and play a nice game of chess tonight ——"

Tommy teetered on his toes and chortled impishly. " Nope! Won't work! Aunt Serena's coming especially to see Len. I heard her ask Mummy if she was strong enough to have visitors, and Mother said Elen would be delighted to meet somebody new."

Sally made a funny little sound of resignation, gathered up her scattered possessions, and then managed a grin in Elen's direction. " Well, Len, this seems to be your ' At Home ' day. And Aunt Serena is really a dear. It's only—

well, she brought Daddy up, and she isn't sure, even yet, that he *is* grown up and responsible. Every time any of us do something without consulting her, she's positive it will prove to be fatal."

Had Uncle Billy consulted her before he made his plans to move his niece from St. Luke's Hospital to Meredith, Elen wondered? And had she approved? Somehow the prospect of facing another visitor tonight did dampen Elen's courage more than a little.

But there certainly was nothing formidable about the little person Uncle Billy brought in an hour or two later. Under her silken white hair the brown eyes were very kind and understanding, the round cheeks delicately pink, and her quick smile was almost mischievous. Altogether Elen thought she looked a satisfying person, even though she did murmur, " It's nice that you are recovering, my dear. I hope you are feeling as well as can be expected? "

Then she settled herself by the fire, and Sally curled up in her favorite position on the couch, with the Chinese checkerboard on the table between her and Elen.

Aunt Serena's knitting needles began to move in and out of her orange wool. " Stephen's not home tonight? "

Stephen's mother shook her head. " No. This is the evening for his 'cello lesson with Mr. LaGarde."

" He's too tense over his music, I think," observed Aunt Serena. " I believe it would be quite as well to stop his lessons for a year or two."

Did Sally sniff? There was no doubt about Uncle Billy's chuckle. " If we tried it the whole family would be more than tense, Aunt Serena."

Aunt Serena smiled gently. " Going in for music so seriously isn't good for a boy. Makes him too much of a hermit. And especially now with this disastrous bowl business. My advice, Billy, is to send him away. An ocean voyage would be a splendid thing. In fact, I ventured to write a friend of mine whose husband is manager of a steamship line, and she thinks Steve can get on one of their fruit steamers next month ——"

The new note in Uncle Billy's voice was so quiet it was odd it should start an electric prickle up Elen's spine. " Are you advising me to have Steve run away from trouble? "

Miss Serena gasped and said very hurriedly and indignantly that she had no such idea! But working his way on a fruit steamer would be such a manly experience ——

" Steve doesn't need it. When he comes through this affair, he'll be a man, and his enemies are not going to have the chance to say he ran away. But thanks for your interest, Aunt Serena."

Apparently Miss Serena was a person who never argued. She merely maintained an irritatingly calm air of being right. Now she only said:

" I know, but ——"

Somehow she managed to convey her conviction that Steve was destined to be a complete failure if he didn't make the voyage she had arranged for him. Sally made a very blundering move, and Elen, looking at her in astonishment, saw her eyes were smouldering. Perhaps it was unfortunate that just at that moment Mrs. Herrick called Aunt Serena's attention to the two old ladder-back chairs which Sally had redecorated, the gold-leaf clusters of fruit and blossoms, which had been worn and scratched, once again perfect and delicate against the black wood. Aunt Serena gave them a careful examination, and then spoke solemnly:

"H'mm—well, of course you were fortunate with these, Sally, but I wouldn't try any more if I were you. These chairs are too valuable to ruin."

Sally's lips twitched. "I haven't ruined anything yet, Aunt Serena, and I did the chairs in Mother's room, too."

"I know, but ——"

Elen tried to strangle a giggle, it turned into choking, and the sound drew Aunt Serena's attention upon her.

"You certainly have a perfect room here, child," she told Elen approvingly. "It might really have been built for an invalid, everything is so convenient. In summer it will be so airy, and with the gardens so near—and when a person is obliged to live in one room ——"

"Oh, but we take Len all over this floor now," interjected Mrs. Herrick quickly, "and before summer's over she'll probably be exploring the garden on her own two feet."

Miss Serena looked positively shocked. She shook her head. "I wouldn't move about very much if I were you," she advised Elen gently. "Back injuries are so tricky. As for walking this summer—well, I wouldn't hope for *that!*"

Somehow Elen contrived a rather feeble grin. "Oh, but all the doctors are counting on it. I wouldn't want to disappoint them."

Aunt Serena smiled at her patiently. "I know, but ——"

What was there about the way she said those three words which could make you feel so baffled and thoroughly defeated? It wasn't that Miss Serena was a lugubrious person. She really seemed a cheerful body, only she had a way of sounding so appallingly *right!* Oh, why had she come tonight and said the very thing to rouse the old nagging terror of permanent helplessness in Elen's heart? Elen took a long breath as she bent over the checkerboard, praying desperately that she could keep from betraying her sudden stab of fear. Sally could be too observant at times.

Somehow she gave a good imitation of being absorbed in the game. She even managed, when Miss Serena came over to bid her good night, to smile, and keep her voice steady and casual, as she said, "It's awfully nice to meet Uncle Billy's Aunt Serena. Sally told me you were a dear."

"I wouldn't believe everything that young woman says." Miss Serena tried to look prim, but her eyes twinkled. Then she bent and kissed Elen lightly. "My dear, will you let me claim you as another niece?"

Elen saluted her departing visitor gaily as she reached the door, and when Uncle Billy closed it behind them, the slender body lay back wearily limp.

Miss Serena had one more bolt to let fly, however. Her soft voice came clearly back to the quiet room: "She *has* the Herrick pluck, Billy! She's a lovely child, but I do wish you and Claire would let me have my way about sending Miss Norris. . . . Oh, I know, but it really must be a burden—and ——" Elen was never sure whether she heard a gasp or not, but certainly there were no more words.

Years before, when she was still a small girl, Professor Mark Powers had given Elen an aversion to letting pain or trouble get the best of her. "If you've been hurt—laugh. If something's gone wrong, keep cool. But always remember, child, wait until you're alone to be miserable." Professor Powers had little use for people who could not endure pain and fear in silence.

The girl Aunt Claire came to attend ten minutes later had hot hands and heavy eyes, but she had enough of Elen's gay spirit to carry her through the nightly routine. If only Aunt Claire wouldn't speak of what she must suspect Elen had heard, perhaps she could hold her courage at the sticking-point until she was alone.

Aunt Claire did not mention it. Perhaps she knew it was too sore a subject to be touched just then, only, when Elen was completely settled for the night, before she gave her the last minute kiss, she gathered the girl's hot fingers into a firm clasp. And the grave eyes that met Elen's miserable ones were filled with understanding. "Len, don't wind yourself too tight over anything you may have heard to-night."

But Elen was already wound. In the oppressive darkness she lay tense and aching, with Miss Serena's words, "But it really must be a burden!" beating a ghoulish rhythm upon her brain. A burden! A—burden! Oh—she was. She had to be. No matter how kind the Herricks were—she was a drag. And she would be for months—yes, and perhaps longer. Miss Serena was right. Injured vertebras were tricky propositions. The doctors might have been too optimistic. It hadn't been right for her to come here. She had known it at St. Luke's! A burden—burden—there was no getting away from the incessant refrain. That one word struck at her like a remorseless hammer, until every nerve in her body was vibrating with pain.

Evidently Miss Serena had foreseen what an upsetting thing the presence of an invalid would be. She must have offered to pay for the services of the nurse who had been Elen's companion on her journey to Meredith, and the proud Herricks had refused. But it wasn't fair—oh, it wasn't fair——

Hour after hour Elen's thoughts made their weary round, even following her into exhausted sleep. She woke the next morning in a state of lassitude in which it did not seem worth the effort to gather the stray ends of her courage together.

It was the morning for the weekly treatment for her knee, but she was no more than vaguely aware of Allan Knight's arrival. Allan, however, could use unique tactics when he chose, and when he did choose, it was difficult to remain vague about his presence!

" I hear," his opening remark was casual enough, " that one of your visitors yesterday sent you on the warpath and the other reduced you to a state of pulp. I'd like to get the details. Sounds interesting."

Elen turned her head away wearily. " It isn't."

" No? Too bad. Well, let's have the tiresome details."

Elen's lips tightened at the corners.

Allan apparently could attend to her knee and keep his gaze on her face. Even with her eyes closed Elen was conscious of his observant glance. After a minute the quizzical voice spoke again.

"You might just as well tell your Uncle Allan, and get it over with, don't you think?" Then, since Elen lay in obstinate silence, the next question came in a sharpened, crisped tone: "Len, are you being so silly as to tie yourself in knots over what you heard Miss Serena say last night? Miss Serena Herrick is a very kind soul, and I have all respect for her, but if you said to her, 'There are forty-eight stars in our flag,' she'd probably say, 'Yes, I know, but——' and you'd be tempted to wonder if there were forty-seven or fifty!"

Just the ghost of a quiver touched his patient's tight mouth. Allan decided upon a sharp thrust. "Len, Miss Serena said you must be a burden. Suppose I tell you you could be the most useful member of this family just now. Which one of us would you believe?"

Here at last was a weapon which struck through her apathy. Startled and quivering, Elen faced him finally, and received another shock. The Allan Knight with the laughing eyes and humorous mouth was gone. It was a professionally keen, commanding, and stern young man who was holding her gaze now that he had captured it.

"Well—take your choice of opinions, Len. Mine or Miss Serena's."

Elen's head moved in faint assent.

"So? You prefer to think you're a burden? And I thought you were really intelligent. My mistake."

The last part of the treatment went on in silence. Then, as he deftly restrapped her knee, Allan returned to the attack.

"Shall I tell you what I'd hoped? Stephen Herrick needs a silver bowl. His family have searched and worried over the problem until their brains are completely muddled. There's no use in going on any more treasure hunts. The thing won't be found that way. What should be done now is for one person to sit down, use his wits, study the problem from all angles and decide how, if Anne is right, and she *did* return the bowl to Steve, she could do it without his knowing it? And if Leslie is right, and she saw someone enter and leave this house, who was it? Thirdly, if someone besides Anne was responsible for that bowl's disappearing, who was it, and why did she or he do it? I'd say that the person who answered these questions would be very close to locating the bowl, and would be extremely useful. You came into the situation with your mind fresh. I hoped you might do it, but apparently you won't. You crumple the first time anything goes halfway wrong."

There was no hint of weariness or defeat in Elen now. And if there had been resentment, it was drowned by the incoming wave of eagerness. Allan chose to ignore the change. He continued to air his disappointment.

"Take Leslie. If someone had the sense and the courage to pry through a chink of that steel-plated armor she wears, they'd strike a real girl. I thought you might have seen something like her on your college campus. That was another of my mistakes. But—oh, well, I thought you were a better sport."

Elen gasped and flinched as she had not flinched at his most painful touch. " Oh."

" You may well say ' Oh.' Leslie's worth having as a friend, though of course you can't believe that. Besides she might be the most important factor in the bowl affair. I'm no detective, but I'd guarantee that the person Leslie saw here that night was the party most thoroughly involved."

" B-but "—Elen stuttered in her amazement—" b-but Leslie insists she saw *Steve* ——"

For the first time that morning Allan grinned. But it was rather a wry effect. " When Leslie says a thing, she means it. But the Herricks have always been so indignant because they knew it hadn't been Steve, that they never stopped to consider it might have been someone else."

Light was breaking over Elen.

" Did—did you maneuver for Leslie to come here? —Oh, why didn't I use my brains? I've gone and befuddled everything! "

The hazel eyes studied her critically, and then the stern lines in the lean face opposite her gradually relaxed. " She'll be coming again to practice. You'll probably have plenty of exercise for your brains then! " He paused, searched in his pocket for something, looked at her speculatively for a minute, and spoke abruptly: " Len, do you mind if I read you a poem? I found it in a newspaper one day, and somehow it reminded me of the Herricks." He produced an envelope and drew out the clipping. " It's called ' The Bold Heart.' *

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* By Abigail Cresson.

"This time I did not win—
And shall I then
Go with bowed head
And never try again?

"No, rather let me strive
The harder still
Until I bend my fortune
To my will.

"Let me not break nor bend
But let me be
Stronger than any fate
That comes to me.

"Let me be bold of heart
And learn to read
In every failure
How I may succeed."

Not great poetry, perhaps, but something brave and challenging seemed to have walked into the room with the words. In the silence that fell after Allan's reading of the last line, Elen's laughter broke uncertain and strained. "Well, if Leslie's 'bold enough of heart' to come again ——"

8

"Let Me Strive the Harder Still"

MARCH came and went. A March of unusually sunny and delightful moods, when the snow, tardy in its appearance, seemed to take its departure overnight, and fearless early birds arrived in Elen's trees.

Larry and Steve, lured by the robin's-egg sky and the bland winds, braved a March week end at Pakawake, and narrowly escaped having the small motorboat crushed as the ice went out in the lake. They returned with the furriest of pink-tinged pussy willows as successors to the crimson berries which had brightened Elen's desk, and a dozen pictures of wild ducks which would have delighted a professional photographer. Elen, looking at them, knew that Larry had taken most of them at a little hidden pond which had been one of their favorite haunts when he was teaching her horseback riding, and she closed her teeth over the sudden stab of aching longing. How long would she have to wait before she could ride a horse to the brink of that pond? One year? Two? Or would it be never?

Larry had given her another picture. The ducks in flight now, spreading out in a graceful V against the background of Mount Castor. It was a magnificent shot, and there was little wonder that Larry's face was lit with sincere pride in his work. When Elen said with trembling lips, "Oh, Larry—*thank* you for getting this ——" he nodded in grave understanding.

"Yes, I know. That one got me, too."

But Elen's heart had gone out to Mount Castor, rather than to the ducks. Somehow, even in a picture, that high peak seemed ready to share its steadfastness and courage.

Elen had need of courage. Probably she should have been content with the gains she had made this month. No, more than content—jubilant. Every sunny day she was, as Larry had found her now, out on the broad porch overlooking the terraces and what would be the gardens. She had begun to use her camera again. She had snapped Sheba in every adorable pose known to a kitten, Steve demonstrating the weird gestures of the school orchestra leader, Sally standing precariously on one foot atop a ladder trying to rescue a humped-back Sheba from the limb of a tree—but compared with Larry's splendid work at Pakawake these shots seemed positively inane!

As for being the "useful person" of her own and Allan Knight's hopes, she was at an impasse. For all her "striving the harder still" she had nothing to show. With the clues both Sally and Larry had given her as a guide, she had made a new and more elaborate diagram of the problem, turning and twisting it until she ended by being convinced that all four of her suspects must be guilty. One day she paraphrased Victor Herbert's song for Allan's benefit:

"I've thunk and thunk and thunk,
Until my brains are numb!
I don't care what Allan says,
I *can't* do this sum!"

As for Leslie—there Elen had met complete and humiliating failure. Leslie was courteous, and exceedingly remote. There were no more crossings of tempers, only a formal greeting and a few polite comments. Leslie would proceed with her practice, and leave with her barrier of indifference intact. Elen would watch her, baffled and defeated. She was a naturally friendly creature, and it was something new and uncomfortable to have anyone resist her friendship as Leslie was doing. If only she had bitten her tongue before she made that silly little speech about "hallucinations." Why had she been so spiteful? At best Leslie's confidence would not be easy to win, and now ——

Leslie was used to the amusement and ridicule of other young people. Perhaps she was scornful of them. But Elen Herrick had been the first person ever to doubt her word. And that hurt.

Elen was forced to admit she admired Leslie for the quiet way in which she made the best of the situation. She must know how Sally and Steve felt toward her. She could never avoid seeing Elen. But for all the sign she gave no one could have guessed anything unpleasant had ever happened. Stiff and aloof though she was, somewhere within her was real courage. Elen began to suspect Allan of being right, that under the Bradstreet barbed reserve might lurk a friend worth having.

For all Elen could see, however, she would continue to lurk well hidden, and if Leslie really did have the key to the bowl's disappearance, she would continue to hold it.

Had Leslie been any other kind of girl Elen would have said, " Remember that horrid thing I said the other day? Well, I'm sorry. Will you be a good egg and try to forget it? "

But her tongue froze when she thought of saying it to Leslie Bradstreet!

Queer, that she should think all that while she looked at Larry's picture of the wild ducks rising toward the summit of Mount Castor! Larry was shaking his head as she tried to hand back the snapshot.

" No, keep it, Len. I made that print for you. Here's one of Steve and his pet deer. That fellow's followed Steve for three years.—You know, he actually began to act human again up there."

" The deer? "

Larry looked pained. " Was that supposed to be clever? Because it wasn't. But he did stop being cynical and acting as though he was an escaped fugitive. If only he'll show some sense now he's back in Meredith—hold up his chin and fight —— It's his confounded stiff-necked attitude that makes people suspicious he really did something."

" Do you think he's beginning to—oh—not think about the bowl so much? "

Larry looked at her. " Do you? "

Elen sighed. By tacit consent the silver bowl was not mentioned in the Herrick family nowadays, but it wasn't forgotten by any means. On an impulse she dived down into the brief case which held her lesson-papers and drew out the new diagram labeled " As E. H. sees the problem."

" Larry, I wish you'd look at this. I can't show it to anyone else. But you saw the other one. This time I've tried to be fair. I haven't said that Anne *has* to know more than she says she does. And I had some other ideas."

Larry gave the paper a thorough appraisal. " Yes. So I notice. And you've included Steve."

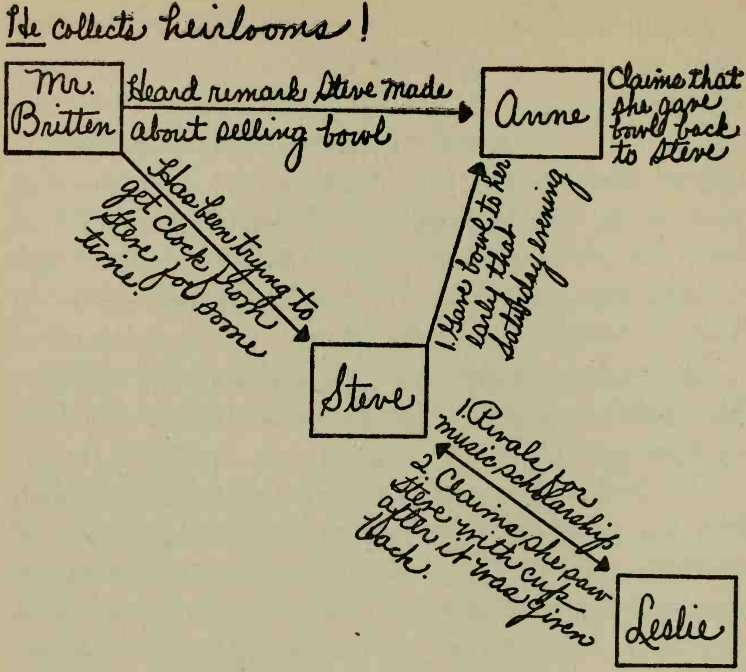
" I couldn't get the right perspective until I did. But he couldn't have done anything more than hand the bowl to Anne ——"

The look which Larry gave her was a little peculiar. Not for months did she know its meaning. " Oh, he probably could have done something more. But let's agree that he didn't. Good piece of work, this. Gives me several new ideas. Well, did you get the answer to who's got the bowl? "

" No," Elen confessed reluctantly. " I've turned my brain upside down trying to reason what Anne probably did with the horrid thing, and how much Mr. Britten knows about where she put it. All I got were question marks! "

Larry was studying the diagram again. " You've missed out on one point." He indicated her list of questions. " ' Why does Mr. Britten try to humiliate Steve? ' Don't you know the story of the Franklin portrait? The one he was forever boasting about, and Mr. Herrick discovered was a fake? He's been sore at the Herricks ever since."

" *Nice* man! " commented Elen.


He collects heirlooms!
Mr. Britten
Heard remark Steve made about selling bowl
Anne
Claims that she gave bowl back to Steve
Has been trying to get clock from Steve for some time.
1. Gave bowl to her early that Saturday evening
Steve
1. Rivals for music scholarship
2. Claims she saw Steve with cup after it was given back.
Leslie

1. Leslie claims she saw Steve with bowl after Anne claims she returned it to him. Steve says he never got it. One of them is wrong!
2. Does Steve know something he hasn't told yet?
3. Why is Mr Britten so interested in seeing Steve humiliated, and why does he do everything he can to remind people about the theft?
4. Suspects:
    - Anne
    - Leslie
    - Mr. Britten
    - Steve (?)

"As E. H. sees the problem."

" And of course he's gunning for Steve's clock. In about three months he'll probably make a tempting offer for it. —Steve still swears he'll sell if that bowl doesn't turn up by then. Gosh! I wish *something* would break soon! "

The thing that broke seemed to have no connection with the missing silver bowl. With the Claudenet Music Institute's spring audition only a week away, Emily Lee, playing on the girls' hockey team, broke two fingers. To anyone else it would have been an inconvenient but not a particularly distressing accident. Happening to Emily Lee it was disaster. She was the violinist who had been selected to play a duet with Leslie Bradstreet at the Claudenet audition, and there was no other violinist in the school orchestra who even approached her in ability. No violinist—but there was a 'cellist! Mr. LaGarde, in charge of Samuel Howe's orchestra, calmly informed Steve that he would take Emily's place in the duet. Steve was equally calm. He would do no such thing.

Mr. LaGarde remarked coldly that he was not accustomed to his pupils flouting him. Certainly the piece could be arranged for the 'cello. Yes, he admitted that Leslie and Steve would have little time to rehearse. That did not greatly matter. Steve was one of those rare musicians who hear a composition perhaps twice and know it phrase for phrase. There was nothing more for him to say. Mr. LaGarde would notify the audition authorities that Stephen Herrick, 'cellist, would substitute for Emily Lee!

The head of Samuel Howe's music department gave a jerky nod of satisfaction and was turning away when Steve's outstretched hand stopped him. " I wouldn't call them, sir. You don't want Sam Howe to do any halfway work, do you? Well, I couldn't go through with that duet—not that the way it should be played. And I *won't* make a botch of it! "

Mr. LaGarde gave Steve the look that could shrivel the other members of the school orchestra. Steve slowly reddened, but he did not retreat.

" So—your opinion is more valuable than mine? " The tone was mild, but Steve writhed for all that. " I tell you you can do it. And you talk about ' botches ' ! Since when have you become so much wiser and more certain than your teachers? "

Steve went white and then red again. He had no answer.

" Never mind. Every young puppy reaches that stage! We'll forget it. You'll play."

" No, sir," said Steve.

Mr. LaGarde was accustomed to issuing dictums and having the people who heard them obey him. To find this boy who was such a promising musician standing out against him so obstinately was unbelievable. His face went blank, then he choked, and burst into sputtering speech: " Get out of my sight!—But don't think I'm finished with you yet! "

Knowing the subtle methods Mr. LaGarde could use upon occasion, Steve had very little peace of mind. But for once Mr. LaGarde chose to be direct. He phoned Mr. Herrick, explained Steve's stubbornness, and asked Stephen's father to compel his son to play.

Mr. Herrick repeated the telephone conversation at dinner that night, and mildly invited Steve to explain his stand.

This was a Herrick tradition, as Elen had learned at Pakawake: When something serious or important or distressing came the Herricks' way, they held a family council. Looking from the wretched, taut Steve to his kindly, quiet father, Elen had a sudden suspicion that it would be harder to face Uncle Billy's gentle inquiries than excitable Mr. LaGarde's wrath.

" Well, son, what about it? " Mr. Herrick was asking reasonably. " You must have your reasons for being what the gentleman informed me was ' mulish.' "

Steve swallowed. " I—I suppose that's how it does—look."

" Well, why are you being ' mulish ' ? "

Steve's fingers crumpled his napkin. " I —— Oh, what's the use? I just couldn't get through that duet. And I *won't* be responsible for a flop! "

" Afraid you haven't time to learn it properly? "

Steve shook his head miserably. " No. I—I could."

A silence descended. Then Uncle Billy said very low, " Steve—is it because Leslie is the other party? "

Steve shook his head slowly.

" Not that. Not stage fright. Oh, well, I'm not given to being a ' compelling parent.' If you ever feel that you'd like to give me your reasons, boy, I'd be glad to have you come to me."

He started to rise, but now at last Steve was looking at his father. His face was turned from Elen, but she never forgot the desperation in his voice as he broke out, "Oh, Dad—*can't* you see—don't you know—if I tried to take such a prominent part at that audition half the audience would be thinking, 'So *he's* the boy who stole the poor old lady's silver bowl. How can he be so shameless as to appear here tonight? I don't see how the girl can bear to play with him!' I'd *feel* people thinking it all around me. I'd make a mess of that glorious music ——"

Something pricked in Elen's spine. So that was it. Lake Pakawake hadn't made him forget.

"I suppose you think your fame has spread far and wide!" Sally was making a half-hearted attempt at sarcasm, "and that all the delegates to the audition will point you out as the 'boy who took Miss Page's bowl ——'"

"I'd be thinking they did," agreed her brother wearily.

There was another troubled silence, broken by Uncle Billy's thoughtful voice: "LaGarde told me that if you failed them Samuel Howe High School would be obliged to forfeit its entry in the duet class, and Leslie would be unable to appear, because it's too late to enter her as a soloist. You know that, I suppose?"

Steve was sitting with his blond head in his hands, an indescribable look of weariness about his shoulders. "Yes. But there's no disgrace in that. And if I made a botch of that music ——"

Elen had an aching yearning to say the right thing. There should be some words that would break through his desolation. Then, much to her own surprise, she heard her voice:

"Steve, *I* think you're doing the right thing! Really you are. Of course if your school loses any credits or points because you don't play, everybody will despise you, but if you did go and make a fizzle of that *Rhapsody* you'd be the laughing stock of the audition ——"

She was conscious of Sally's exclamation of disapproval, and Aunt Claire's peculiar expression, but she had Steve's attention, and she swept serenely on. Somehow she knew exactly what to say. "It will be just the kind of revenge to take on Leslie for insisting she saw you here when she didn't, and ——"

At the word "revenge" Steve's face had gone blank. He looked first at his mother and then at his father in a dazed way, and his words were almost a whisper. "Would —would people really think ——"

"They would really have reason, don't you think?" his father inquired gently.

Still Steve looked blank. Then abruptly his eyes were ablaze. He stumbled to his feet and walked stiffly out of the dining-room.

"Now what for Pete's sakes ——" began the bewildered Sally.

Aunt Claire smiled tremulously. "I think he's gone to make a telephone call."

Three minutes later Stephen was rejoining his family. He still looked a bit grim, but he no longer seemed at odds with all Meredith. He spoke directly to Elen. "It may please you to know I'm not taking a revenge against Leslie. I've just told LaGarde I'll play the *Rhapsody* with her. I hope you'll be willing to take the consequences upon your own head, for that's where they belong!"

9

Second Fiddle

PERHAPS it was because of the peculiar conditions under which they heard it, but the *Gypsy Rhapsody* seemed to do queer things to the Herricks that week. When she first listened to it on the record Mr. LaGarde gave Steve, Elen, always sensitive to the moods in music, was lifted to a point of exultation by the fiery beauty and poignant ecstasy of the thing. Near the end of the week the fierce gaiety seemed to have vanished and she grew intensely conscious of the minor notes voicing a cry which all the merriment and dancing in the world could not drown.

It wasn't merely a trick of her own imagination. All the family were aware of it. After Steve's third day of work on the *Rhapsody,* Sally was shivering at the sound.

"I can't imagine how such a lovely thing can sound so—so *sinister!*" she muttered to Elen under her breath. "It's uncanny!"

An hour later Tommy was complaining, "Why did we let Steve get into this, anyhow? My head's so full of that whirligig music I can't hear anything else! It gives me the willie-waggles!"

"It's because we're all so tense about it," said Aunt

Claire. "We feel like one of Steve's strings when he's overtightened it."

"Gosh, I don't wonder they wail!" observed Tommy feelingly.

As for Steve, his days seemed spent beside the phonograph, at first listening with such intent concentration that Elen ached with sympathy watching him, then following the record on his 'cello. He went over the *Rhapsody* with his teacher from the city, and with Mr. LaGarde and Leslie at school. Only once did the two of them rehearse at the Herrick house. After that rehearsal Elen admitted to herself that Steve had been right: He could not go through with that duet—not with Leslie, at least.

Playing alone, Steve's music was a delight. Young as he was he could coax clear, satin-soft and rich tones from his somewhat battered 'cello. Left to herself Leslie could fill the room with really glorious sound. But playing together both of them lost the thing that made their music real and living. Between them they contrived to make the *Gypsy Rhapsody* a travesty of what it should be. It wasn't because Steve couldn't play the string part properly, because he could. And surely if Leslie had played the piano part as mechanically and half-heartedly with Emily Lee as she played it with Steve, Mr. LaGarde would never have chosen her to represent the Samuel Howe High School in such an important event.

And it *was* important. Steve had explained to Elen that the Claudenet Musical Institute held this audition in the spring for the benefit of high school pupils who were seriously interested in music. Each of the high schools in

Juston County might enter its orchestra, and a candidate for solo or candidates for duo performance. Each delegate received a certain number of points, and the school received credit as well. You had to be *good* to go to the Claudenet audition.

Separately Leslie and Steve certainly were entitled to be called *good*, but together—well, Elen was forced to admit that together they were terrible! Playing with Steve, all Leslie's stiffness, doubts and embarrassment rose to the surface, and with Leslie Steve was anything but at his ease.

" I'm sorry you had to have me foisted upon you at the last minute. I can understand exactly how you feel about it," Steve had observed tactfully to Leslie.

" It was generous of you to do this." Leslie gave him a frigid smile of thanks. " You're not used to playing second fiddle, and I know just how you feel about *that!* "

Two more rigidly polite and coldly aloof people Elen had never seen. If either of them possessed any saving humor or charm they had certainly mislaid it. Perhaps it was no wonder that the *Gypsy Rhapsody* under their hands became a poor, stiff thing.

Restoring his 'cello to its shabby case when Leslie had taken her departure, Steve spoke bitterly to Elen:

" I hope you're satisfied with the results of your little speech about ' revenge.' Now if you're honest you'll admit Leslie and I do a horrible job. I'm sure everyone's going to be delighted with us at the audition! "

He went out, leaving Elen hating herself for having used the tactics she had to force him into playing. He and Leslie would probably give a hideous performance just as he had predicted.

Altogether it was a ghastly week. When Elen woke in the dawn of Friday morning she drew a sharp breath of relief. Tonight Leslie and Steve would probably do their worst. But at least the horrible suspense would be over!

For some reason she did not see Steve until dinnertime. Then he was gay with a brittle courage. The rest played up to him. Just as he rose from the table to go dress for the trip to Juston City and the audition, he turned suddenly serious. Not sullen nor desperate now, but sobered. He looked swiftly from his father to Sally: " Dad —Sally—would you do me a favor? Would you mind very much if I asked you to stay away from this audition? If—well, if it should go wrong, I'd rather you weren't there."

Protest rose in Sally's face, but Mr. Herrick forestalled her.

" If our absence will be a help, we will certainly stay at home, son."

Steve's smile was grateful. " Thanks, Dad."

" But you won't forbid our listening to the broadcast, will you? " Sally inquired. " Because it wouldn't do any good if you did."

Elen caught at the word eagerly. " Then we'll be able to hear the audition—all of it? "

Steve nodded. " Oh, yes. Well—perhaps that will be as good a way as any to hear the bad news. Save me the trouble of telling it when I get home."

The boy who came downstairs thirty minutes later to wait for Mr. LaGarde's call was not the unwilling, desperate Steve who had fought against taking a conspicuous rôle in the audition. He was in formal dress, of course, and Elen was startled by the transformation. Actually he looked distinguished. He was rather pale and very taut, but his head was high.

The Herrick feelings ran too deep for anything so banal as wishing Steve good luck. With only a long handclasp on his father's part, and the touch of his mother's hands on his shoulders, Steve went out with Mr. LaGarde. Whatever hopes and fears followed him remained unspoken.

The next hour dragged on limping feet. Aunt Claire tried to chatter brightly, Uncle Billy pretended to be busy with reports from the Museum, but Elen noticed through the open door that half a dozen sheets were flung into his wastepaper basket. Sally roamed the room restlessly, or sat in the window seat drumming her fingers against the windowpane until Elen's nerves quivered at every tap.

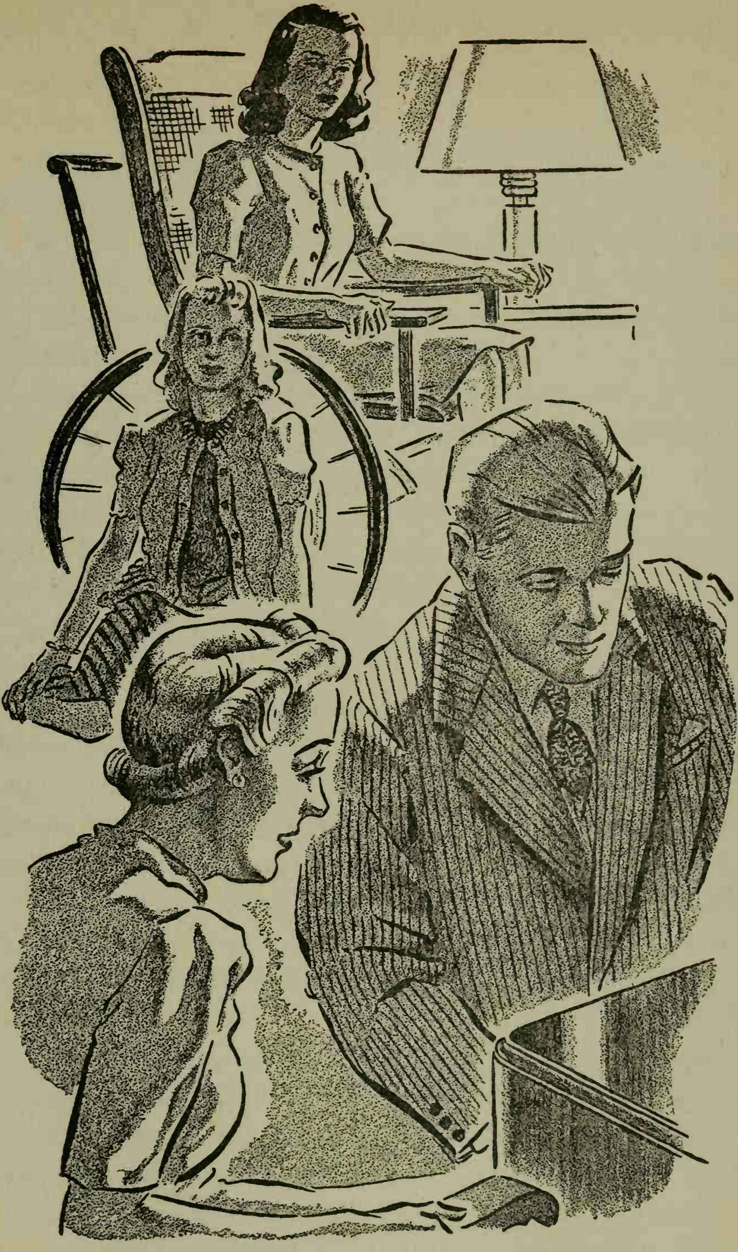
"If Steve fails tonight he'll be the laughing stock of Meredith!" Sally said miserably.

"Shall we wait until he does fail?" suggested Aunt Claire.

"If he does—make a fizzle of it"—Elen's breath caught in her throat—"will it be my fault because I goaded him into saying he'd play?"

"If he comes through well tonight I think we'll have our old Steve back again," said Aunt Claire.

Sally said, "If ——" and took to drumming on the pane again.



It was Uncle Billy who set the radio at the right station.

At half-past eight Uncle Billy joined them. Sally started toward the radio, halted, stretched out her hand and then drew it back once more. " I—I'm not sure I want to hear it! "

It was Uncle Billy who set the radio at the right station.

Sally dropped to her favorite seat, the floor, and leaned her head against Elen's chair.

There were only seven high schools represented at the audition. Steve had been right: The delegates from those seven schools were undeniably *good.*

" Fine work! " said Uncle Billy more than once, and nodded in quick approval, when, as the fourth orchestra to play, Samuel Howe High offered *Marche Slav.* " Good shading. I wouldn't have expected it from such youngsters."

The program was more than half finished before they heard the announcement for which they had been waiting: " Entry No. 16, in the duo class, from school No. 4, piano and violoncello, *Gypsy Rhapsody,* by Hummermann."

Aunt Claire leaned forward intently, and suddenly Uncle Billy snapped out the lights. Perhaps darkness would help the Herricks to bear what they were expecting to hear.

Into the room, gay and challenging, came the high, staccato notes of the piano sounding the gypsy tambourines. Then, slowly, and almost muted, the deep voice of the 'cello was answering. Elen felt Sally start, and her own breath seemed to stop. For that 'cello was being played with an assured touch, and its tones were rising rich and strong and unutterably lovely. The piano, uniting with them, rang out sweetly alive and eager.

" It *can't* be——" breathed Sally.

" Quiet! " warned Uncle Billy.

In perfect harmony the two instruments wove their melody, magical, bewilderingly joyous, excited, enchantingly gay one moment, poignantly tender and sad the next, soaring upward with a cascade of rapid sound to what Tommy had called the " whirligig part," and slowing to the solemn minor undercurrent of the *Rhapsody* where the piano ceased and the 'cello carried on the haunting phrases alone. Crystal and sparklingly lovely came the melody from the piano in lovely accord with the glorious 'cello, now powerful, now velvet-smooth and gentle.

Times without number had the little group in Elen's sanctum heard that *Rhapsody* during the past week, but not as it was being played now. Now it was something come alive.

When the music had been woven into the last swift crescendo, and the applause had broken out in the auditorium, Aunt Claire straightened her fingers from Elen's painful clasp. She laughed shakily. Then her voice broke.

" They did it—oh—they *did* it! "

Sally was crying unashamedly, and Elen was feeling strange and shaken. She was glad Uncle Billy reached over and shut off the radio. For the Herricks the audition was over.

" I *knew* they'd do it! " Aunt Claire's eyes were shining.

" But what happened? " Sally was still breathless.

"That," said her father, "is what I'll be interested to know."

The time between the playing of the duet and the sound of Steve's quick steps across the porch seemed to stretch out to double length. When he did finally stand before his family no one seemed to find the proper words. Steve paused in the doorway, a little flushed, his head flung back, the old light in his eyes. But when he tried to speak his lips trembled suspiciously.

"Well ——"

"Yes," his father agreed, "it is well. Very well indeed!"

"Yes—I—I guess it is. You didn't hear the announcement of the awards, did you? They gave seventy-five points to Sam Howe, and seventy to Leslie, and eighty for me."

"That sounds rather high," Aunt Claire commented in a voice that was still a little unsteady.

Steve swallowed. "Well—in a way. It—it was the highest anyone received."

"But what *happened* to you both?" Sally cried.

Steve looked at her. He grinned, faintly. "You must have been surprised! Just as we went up to the platform Leslie—told me something! I could have played under Toscanini after that."

"*Told* you something? Leslie? For pity's sake, what was it?"

"Now that," said Stephen Herrick slowly, "is between Leslie Bradstreet and myself."

10

Leslie Supplies the Coupling Pin

ELEN turned her head irritably. Why must Sally insist on keeping up that senseless and incessant tapping against the windowpane? It was bad enough to have the old pain stabbing at her back again without listening to that tattoo! She said: "Don't, Sally——" and then opened her eyes to a bleak day. The tattoo wasn't Sally. It was rain, flung against the eastern windows by a fitfully strong wind.

But the pain was real enough. Elen had been so free from it in the past few weeks, sitting up straighter and straighter, and generally feeling so fit that she had nearly forgotten what wretched hours those injured vertebras could give her. Indeed she had hoped they were healed, and that it only remained for her knee to mend. Apparently that would have been too good to be true.

A blithe whistle sounded through the house. Only Steve could whistle like that. And Elen hadn't heard him give those delicate bird-calls since Pakawake days. Evidently the world had righted itself for Steve.

Aunt Claire had a new glow about her when she came to help Elen prepare for breakfast.

"If the weather's trying to dampen the Herrick spirits," her eyes danced with laughter, "it's wasting its good rain. We wouldn't know a cloud when we saw one this morning!"

Elen clenched her teeth to keep back the sharp intake of her breath as Aunt Claire raised the head of her bed, and adjusted a fresh pillow. She tried to summon a convincing note of eagerness into her voice as she questioned, "Has Steve said anything more ——"

Aunt Claire, bringing water, sponge and towels, laughed. "Yes! Plenty! Steve whistles, he grins—he almost cavorts, but just try to inveigle one atom of information as to what Leslie divulged, and he makes such tantalizing remarks you want to throw him out on his ear!"

Just to think of the energy required for such action gave Elen a fresh ache. She did manage to grin as both Sally and Steve appeared with her breakfast.

"How's the conquering hero?"

Even as he held the tray, Steve made a bow which would have done credit to a diplomat. "I? I'm grand, thank you. Sally, please observe how I am appreciated."

Sally snorted. "He isn't any kind of a hero, Len. He's only had a rush of success to the head. I really think he's lost the few wits he had. When you try to ask a simple, straightforward question he gives you the silliest of answers, and then he acts like the Cheshire Cat."

Steve dropped the legs of the bed tray and presented it to Elen with a flourish. "There, Madam! Herrick service at its best! Now as to my sister's insults—I ask you:

If anyone tried prying into your strictly personal, private affairs, wouldn't *you* have more sense than to spill all you knew? Of course you would!"

"Try him, Len!" challenged Sally. "Just ask him the first thing that pops into your mind, and see what happens."

"Yes, try me, Len. Of course you're not interested in your hot breakfast. But go ahead. Ask your question, and judge for yourself if my wits——" He made a circular gesture, settled himself on the arm of the nearest chair, folded his hands and gazed at Elen with rapt attention.

"Well—oh—what happened to Leslie last night?"

"She decided that perhaps I wasn't a criminal after all."

Despite Sally's warnings, Elen stared blankly. "She—uh—what?"

"You heard him!" Sally's tone was triumphant. "Absolutely silly. Poor boy! It's too bad! Right after his first success, too."

Her brother maintained his look of benign composure. "Oh, well, I'm used to these sisterly insinuations. I'll just have to bear with her patiently until this evening. I think she'll appreciate my worth tonight. In fact I'm going to make several people very happy before tonight. Isn't that nice of me?" He smiled gently and tantalizingly.

Sally raised her eyebrows at Elen. "You see?" she asked meaningly.

Somehow this gay foolery made the pain easier to bear. Elen found herself able to eat the breakfast which she had surveyed with shuddering distaste when it first appeared.

Now that her mind was really awake and active, a sudden illuminating idea darted through it. It—it wasn't plausible, it *couldn't* be—and yet that was the only solution. There was only one thing Leslie could have said to rouse Steve from his lethargy of the past months. Elen ventured another question. " What are you doing with yourself today? "

It was the most innocent kind of bait. No wonder Steve rose to it at once. " For one thing I'm going out and hike over the hills this morning. I like to be out in the rain. Takes the knots out of my system."

Elen nodded in wistful understanding. Yes, she knew. There was something especially enticing about walking through a spring rain and seeing things turn green almost before your eyes. When the new, short grass was so laden with raindrops it seemed to have a silver crest. Yes, the rain was the thing for Steve when he wanted to exult that the strain of the past week was well past—and—perhaps—another cause for celebration within his reach.

Elen spoke very casually now. " Are you going to hunt for gold in ' them thar hills ' ? "

Did Steve give the least bit of a start? " This isn't California. Sorry to disappoint you. I'm just going to take a walk."

Their eyes met in sudden understanding. Elen's comment about the possibility of a *silver* treasure went unspoken.

" If I were going to be home today, instead of having to go to the city with Daddy, I'd squeeze Leslie's confidences out of you," Sally asserted as she rose to go.

Steve's smile could be baffling and maddening at one and the same time.

" Try your luck, Len! " Sally urged.

" Listen to me, Elen." Steve strolled over and lifted the tray. " Never wheedle. Nine to one it won't work."

Elen grinned at him. " I've got better weapons," she agreed.

" I'm going for my walk," he grinned back.

Sally and her father left for the city. Steve, having made himself useful about the house, and having transferred Elen to her lounge by the window, departed for his walk, first showing Elen that he was going empty-handed. " No pick," he proclaimed, " no axe, no shovel. Not even an umbrella. In other words, no gold."

" Good luck just the same," Elen wished him.

They looked at each other, Elen steadily, Steve in a startled fashion. Under his breath Steve murmured, " Thanks! " and was gone.

The house was quiet. The rain sluiced steadily against her windows. Not a peltingly hard storm, but a steady, gentle summons to the sleeping earth. Almost Elen could see the buds swell on the maple tree beside the porch and the green things in the garden lift their heads triumphantly. The pain in her back had dulled to a monotonous ache. She lay watching the raindrops and wondering where Steve had gone in quest of the silver bowl. And how had Leslie, of all people, known its hiding place?

Why should Leslie have to be the person to bring the bowl to light? Oh, it wasn't that Elen didn't want the mystery and suspicion lifted from Steve, but if Leslie did it, she, Elen, would still have accomplished absolutely nothing to justify her presence here.

That was utterly childish and selfish, but a listless and " nothing-under-the-sun-matters " feeling usually did succeed these bouts of pain, and when she was in that state, her good sense and humor refused to function.

She realized some time later that the doorbell had sent forth a summons. She had a vague sense of irritation a minute or two later when Leslie herself appeared in the doorway. The quarantine was lifted from her own home. She had no more excuse to come to the Herricks' to practice. Why should Elen have to cope with her today?

Actually Leslie was on the verge of being pretty. A flush had crept into her usually pale cheeks, her vividly blue eyes were alight. For the time being at least she had lost her half-supercilious, half-defiant look. Evidently success agreed with her. When she spoke it was in a shy hesitating way which made her voice entirely different from her ordinary positive, flat tone.

" Steve—left his music in our car last night. So I thought—I'd bring it over to him. Mrs. Herrick says he—isn't home just now, so I'll wait—just a few minutes."

Leslie had certainly never exhibited a special desire for Stephen Herrick's company before. Why hadn't she simply left the music and departed? So Steve had come home from the audition in the Bradstreet car?

" Sit down and wait," Elen heard herself saying. " Oh, and congratulations, Leslie! I thought I was sick and tired of that *Rhapsody,* but I never dreamed it could be so lovely."

It was astonishing how winsome Leslie's smile could be. "Thanks. It really was mostly Steve. I—I *knew* he could play it, but all this week I was nearly frantic ——"

Yesterday Elen would have jumped at the admission. If something could make her frantic, Leslie must be pretty human after all. But today she was too sunk in apathy to take advantage of the opening. Perhaps she betrayed it, for suddenly Leslie looked concerned.

"You're tired," she said. "Perhaps I'd better—no, I won't go; I'll do what I do when my grandmother's tired."

She slipped to the piano bench, and touched the keys softly. Tender scraps of songs filled the room, songs with gentle laughter, tinkling like notes from an old melodeon, whispering songs, tiny minuets. They seemed to do for Elen what the spring rain must be doing for Steve—unknotting all the tensed nerves, wiping away weariness and bringing a new tide of fresh hope. It was queer what music could do!—And what Leslie could do with music! Why should she do it for Elen Herrick? The mood of the music changed abruptly.

Now Leslie was playing something which reminded Elen of the snow-covered slopes and wintry woods in New Hampshire. Delicate, and sharp and sparkling. On an impulse she broke the silence.

" Leslie, please—what is that? I—I love it."

For some reason Leslie's voice was rather chill. "Oh—just a little something I picked up somewhere. Personally I don't think it amounts to much."

Elen's ire rose. "Well, I do! What is it? It sounded like snowy hills, and sleet, and fir trees standing against the stars ——" She broke off gasping, for Leslie had suddenly wheeled to face her, and in all her life Elen had never seen such eagerness as blazed in Leslie's face now.

"Len, *did* you mean that? But—but you couldn't know! Could you really hear all that?"

"I did, I tell you, I did! Leslie, did you ——"

"Yes, I—I ——" For the first time Elen heard Leslie laugh, excitedly and high at first, then chokily. "I—I called it '*Winter Ecstasy.*' And you *heard* the winter —— Oh, oh, I *can* do it! I can write music! Even if I am a dumb bunny about everything else ——" She stopped aghast, and Elen caught her up swiftly.

"If that's any proof of your musical puddings, you certainly can write music. But I'm not so sure about your being a 'dumb bunny'——"

"You might ask Sally or Larry or Loris Kieth," Leslie suggested dispassionately.

"I don't need to ask them," Elen retorted. "I hope I have enough brains to form a few opinions of my own!"

Leslie pushed back her heavy hair with a characteristic sweep of her hand. Something within her seemed to droop a little. "I *am* queer," she admitted finally. "I know it. I don't seem to belong anywhere but on a piano bench. I'd love to be foolish and bright and clever like Sally, but you should see how awful I am when I try it. I'd like to do the things everybody else does, but something just screws up tight inside me. One of my teachers once said I should have been born forty years ago." She paused and shrugged. "Probably I'd have been just as queer then."

There ought to be some comfort to offer a girl who looked at you with such unconscious wistfulness. Elen was too embarrassed and dumbfounded by this sudden ruthless self-analysis to find words.

After a moment Leslie went on with her self-denunciation: "I think I could stand being queer—I've been that all my life, but when I think what a coward I've been lately, I despise myself.—Oh, yes, I have ——" She silenced Elen's murmur of protest. "If I hadn't been I'd have told what I knew about—well, about something, months ago ——" She looked at Elen sharply.

"If you mean what you told Steve just before it was your turn at the audition, I don't know what it was," Elen assured her swiftly. "None of us do. Steve said that was between you and himself."

Leslie drew a quick breath. "I didn't know anybody could be so—so *swell!*" The unaccustomed word fell oddly from her lips. "I've been so contemptible. I've known this thing for months. But the day it happened I'd seen Sally mimic me, and everybody laughed. I —— Oh, Elen, have you ever wanted to *hurt* a person?—No, you wouldn't ——"

"Once I did," Elen admitted, remembering Leslie's first visit. "Nice feeling, isn't it?"

Leslie shivered. Her voice was rapid. "Well, I wanted to hurt Sally. Then that night ——"

"You found a way," said Elen coolly.

"Yes. I—I only meant to worry Sally a little. I always intended to tell ——" Her eyes were pleading. "But it got harder and harder the longer I waited ——"

" It would."

" I kept hoping ——"

" That the bowl would be found," supplied Elen.

Leslie started. " Y-yes. How did you know? "

Elen shrugged. " I guessed, this morning, when Steve was so jubilant about something. I thought you must have told him where to find the bowl. I've always thought you were mixed up in the affair somehow, but I never could guess how."

" Mrs. Springstead had asked me to play at a program her department of the Woman's Club was giving," Leslie explained. " I went to see her about it that night. Steve didn't see me. Neither did Mr. Britten.—He was there too, you know. I was in the living-room by the piano. Mrs. Springstead came to me and asked me to wait while she put away a package. She told me where she was putting it. I didn't know what it was until the trouble broke. Then ——" she twisted her fingers. " Oh, it does sound despicable! I—I thought I'd let Sally know what it was to be hurt. I waited a week or two—and then I—I got scared! Suppose it *wasn't* where Mrs. Springstead had said she was putting it? People would naturally think that I —— Oh, no, you couldn't understand how anyone could be so hateful and sneaking—I know what you're thinking ——"

It *was* hard for Elen to imagine the kind of a narrow, thwarted, friendless existence this girl must have led to let her be willing to keep silent while shame and misery dogged Steve's footsteps.

" You wanted to strike back at Sally, so you let Steve be disgraced, and old Miss Page think her heirloom lost and gone forever," Elen said slowly.

Leslie's hands went out in a desperate gesture. She started to speak and thought better of it. Elen's eyes had grown too wrathful.

" And to cap it all, you told that nice tale about seeing Steve come home that night, and then run away again! " she said bitterly.

Leslie's cheeks were hot, but her eyes met Elen's unflinchingly. " That part was true! I *did* see him."

" Then, last night, just in time to save yourself from humiliation and defeat, you told Steve where the thing was."

Leslie's lip was caught in her teeth. " No. That wasn't the reason. Of course you can't believe this. I wouldn't in your place. But—all at once I couldn't stand it to have Steve hurt any longer." She had been facing the window, and now she leaped to her feet. " He's—he's back! "

Probably Aunt Claire told Steve who was waiting with Elen, for he paused only long enough to discard his wet slicker before he came through the intervening rooms. The first look at his strained, blank face was enough to tell both girls the search had failed.

" But ——" faltered Leslie.

" It wasn't there," said Steve laconically.

" But ——" Leslie began again, and choked. " Oh, it *has* to be! "

" The bowl doesn't agree with you. Sorry."

Leslie's voice rose in a forlorn little cry. " Oh—what must you be thinking about me *now?* "

11

The Proof of the Picture

STEVE made an odd little motion with his head. "I think you've been telling the truth, all right," he said dryly. "If you had tried to invent a suitable place for me to find it, you'd have told me to look inside the grand piano instead of the refrigerator."

"The—*what?*" Elen stared from the white-faced girl to her cousin standing with folded arms. "Anne's refrigerator, you mean?"

"Quite so," said Steve with ominous patience.

"That's where Mrs. Springstead told me she was putting it," Leslie explained unhappily.

"But—but—if she'd put the thing there, it would have been found ages ago," expostulated Elen. "You couldn't mislay a package in a refrigerator for months on end."

"Yes, you could," Steve contradicted her, "the way I thought Anne did it: Her refrigerator—it's electric—has a very large motor compartment at the top. Once I remember she lost her purse, and then remembered she had hidden it in the top of the refrigerator because she'd heard there'd been robberies in the neighborhood. She thought the top of her refrigerator was a good safety deposit box. That was why I was pretty positive Leslie was right. But "—he shrugged slightly—" it just isn't there."

" Did you look inside? " suggested Leslie.

Steve glared at both girls. " Inside, and under and behind," he said grimly. " Yes, and inside the piano and down the laundry chute, and several other places! "

" Do you "—Leslie colored painfully, choked and then plunged on—" do you think it might have been stolen? "

Steve looked at her. " Well, I'm not ready to ask for a warrant to search anybody just yet. No, I don't think *you* have it tucked away, if that's what you mean."

" I've been wondering," Elen broke in, " could Mr. Britten have heard Anne say where she was going to put that package? "

Leslie considered, shook her head, and then shrugged doubtfully. " I—I don't know. Perhaps he could. Mrs. Springstead didn't speak so awfully loud, but ——"

" Perhaps that's why she changed her mind about its hiding place," suggested Steve. " Because she didn't know whether or not he'd heard. Although I do think the old geezer's honest ——"

" How do you know she changed her mind about putting it in the refrigerator? " demanded Elen.

Steve regarded her with patient tolerance. " Some girls," he observed, " are silly some of the time, and some of them are silly all of the time. Even *my* relatives can't escape the blight! How do I know she changed her mind? Why, because, in words of one syllable, the bowl is not there! "

Elen looked skeptical. To her that did not seem conclusive proof. There was something about Leslie which convinced her of the girl's honesty, but she had no such assurance about Mr. Britten ——

Twice Leslie had opened her lips and closed them again. Now she opened them a third time and her words came out with a resolute little rush: " Steve—I've told you everything I know about this, truly I have. Now will you tell me something, please? "

Steve bowed. " Anything your heart desires to know, Mademoiselle."

" Then why do you insist that you didn't come home that night when you did? "

Steve stiffened slowly. His chin lifted. His eyes turned dark. But his voice was oddly gentle. " Yes, I've wondered about that myself. Why do *you* insist I was here when I wasn't? "

" Oh, Steve—I saw you! " Leslie's voice was trembling. " I—I did! "

Steve looked grim. " Well, I must have been walking in my sleep."

" Couldn't it have been someone else—just a caller, Leslie? " Elen tried to suggest, tactfully. Leslie looked at her and then at Steve with a hurt, baffled expression, and suddenly her face was stubborn.

" No, it couldn't! Because it was Steve. He was wearing the uniform he had while he drove the Kay-Bee truck. And he came into the house, and then went out, and dashed around the corner. But if he wants to have it stand this way "—she waved her hands in the little gesture

Elen had noticed so often—" that certainly is his affair. Good-bye, Len."

Elen stared after her, wishing she knew whether to laugh, be irritated or sorry. In less than an hour Leslie had by turns been wistful, appealing, generous with her gift of music, obstinate and exasperating. Once Elen had thought she was on the threshold of a real friendship with her; now it seemed as though Leslie was stubbornly determined to be disagreeable.

She met Steve's perplexed eyes, and he shook his head ruefully.

" Gosh," he said slowly, " you know that kid almost has me convinced that I was here that night! It's uncanny! Oh, Len, where is that plagued bowl? "

Apparently there was no answer to that. The day which had begun with such high hopes ended in flat disappointment. And the next days brought nothing new, although Sally and Aunt Claire made a fresh search of the Springstead house. But at least Steve did not lapse back to quite his old low mark of indifference and despair. And disappointingly futile as everything about the bowl business seemed, the days were filled with real adventure for Elen.

Spring had come to Meredith, what Robert Browning called " real, true spring," and, marvel of marvels, Elen was watching it from the vantage point of the garden.

The day after Steve's failure to find the bowl in Anne's refrigerator was one of those sparkling blue-and-white-and-gold days early April brings all too seldom. The sort of day which Elen would ordinarily have used to explore the joyous spring woods. The trees would just be coming alive, early flowers waiting for those who knew where to look, and the birds could be seen to best advantage. Elen had been fighting against the memory of the woods in spring, and trying to be content with her porch, when, in the warmest part of the morning, Allan Knight had appeared.

"I hope you are an out-of-door girl," he remarked, "because I'm prescribing the garden as a spring tonic from now on."

Elen never forgot the wonder of that first journey across the lawn and through the garden. Not many plants were in evidence, but the forsythia was at the full height of its golden glory, the daffodil buds were unfurling, and there was even a thrill in seeing how the brave spears of the iris had pierced the winter-bound ground. Above her the sky was an almost unbearably lovely blue, with white-curled clouds. The fragrant wind, still holding a tinge of keenness, touched new color into her cheeks. She might not see the woods this spring, but out here in the garden she felt free and filled with a courage all the indoor comforts and attention had never succeeded in giving her.

"Of course there isn't so much to be seen now," Sally said, strolling up, "but later when the peonies and lilies and roses are in bloom, it's rather nice."

"Not much to be seen?" Elen echoed indignantly. "You must be an idiot, Sally Herrick!"

Elen had cause to bless the former owners of the Herrick place for laying out their garden with brick walks. It almost seemed as though it had been done for her special convenience! She spent most of her days in the garden now, warmly wrapped, with her chair in the sun. Never having seen a garden at such close range, every day was a real adventure. Aunt Claire's spreading violet bed seemed a miracle, and when the row of magnolias down the terrace broke into bloom the ecstasy of the sight was so exquisite that it hurt.

And the birds! Elen had always been a friend of birds, but she had sought them in the woods. Now, to her delight she found they were quite at home in the Herrick garden, and gathered about her unafraid. Wrens, martins, and catbirds came to take possession of Steve's bird-houses. Two orioles conducted their courtship within range of her opera glass; an assorted gathering came to dine on crumbs and suet and grain spread not three feet away from her chair; indeed, two or three of the bravest robins took their bit from her hands! And one joyous day she discovered that the half-dead tree very near her favorite spot was tenanted by bluebirds.

"That's a token of trust you may be proud of!" breathed Aunt Claire as she and Elen neglected their garden lunch to watch the house-building process.

"Oh," explained Elen, "birds aren't afraid of people who know how to sit still, and that's something I've learned how to do beautifully.—Aunt Claire! You know what I'm going to do? I'm going to make a series of snapshots, showing each stage of that bluebird family!"

"How about the eggs, when they're buried deep in that hole?" Aunt Claire's eyes crinkled with laughter. "Are you going to borrow an X-Ray from Allan?"

Elen made a face at her. " Well—but all the rest! Oh, I can! "

Even Leslie seemed to react to the spell of the garden. She, too, was a person who could hold herself still, and she came to see if she could capture the various bird-calls in music. At least, that was the excuse she offered. Privately Elen thought she was trying to make a little venture in friendship. She wasn't quite so curt and positive and stilted now, and once or twice she surprised Elen with a faint glimmer of humor. It was evident that she had a wistful liking for Steve, but let Sally or Larry Peel approach, and she stiffened instantly and fled at the first opportunity.

She could still be aggravating however, as Elen discovered one afternoon when they were in the garden and Leslie asked abruptly if there were any new clues about the missing bowl. When Elen shook her head, she frowned, tore up one sheet of music, began another, and then suddenly broke out, " If Steve would only admit that he *was* here that night, perhaps this mystery would begin to clear up ——"

" Leslie Bradstreet! Do you still believe ——"

Leslie gathered her music paper and pencils together and stood up with dignity. " But I tell you I *saw* him! "

The blandness of Elen's smile could be rather disconcerting upon occasion, and Leslie's bleak haughtiness was very effective in its own way. Ahead of them a sudden chuckle and then the sound of a gay voice broke the silence.

" Nice expressions, both of you! Thanks, girls! "

It was Larry Peel, who had come to take photographs of Aunt Claire's special spring flowers. Elen jumped and Leslie whirled about. " A candid camera fiend is so despicably sly! " she observed scornfully.

Larry grinned. " Yep! Sly is my middle name," he agreed amiably. " Don't go, Lee. Let me take a real picture now, with these dark iris."

" One will be enough for today," said Leslie coldly, and stalked out of the garden. Larry waved his hand airily after her, whistled *The Lass with the Delicate Air,* and grinned again at Elen. " Sorry to scare away your little chum! "

Elen made a grimace. " Larry, what is the matter with the poor thing? Just when I think she really might be a chum, she does something to make me boil! If she ever needs a theme-song she can sing, ' But I *saw* him! ' Allan had an idea that if somebody could discover the person Leslie really saw that night he'd have the secret of the whole thing."

Larry, adjusting his tripod, and focusing his lens upon the most glorious group of iris, grunted. " Oh, he did, did he? Allan has some very quaint ideas upon occasion."

" But you'd have to use a crowbar to get a new idea into Leslie's head! She's said she saw Steve, so it has to be. The idea that it might have been somebody else isn't—well, it just *isn't,* that's all! "

Larry grunted again, snapped the shutter, and carried his camera to the terrace where he would be within range of the magnolias. When he returned Elen's temper was still smouldering. " She's almost got Steve to the point where he wonders if he *did* come home ——"

Larry's eyes were on the camera. " Perhaps that would be a good thing." His voice was very somber.

Shocked into silence, Elen could only stare at him. The shutter clicked once more, and Larry turned slowly to face her, a more serious Larry than she had ever seen. " Len, if I should tell you something I've never told anyone else, would it be safe with you? "

Instinctively Elen crossed her hands over her heart. Larry hesitated, as if he had a minute of doubt, and then spoke rapidly.

" Last fall I experimented with some night shots. I—I happened to take one of Steve as he came into the house one night. It was a good picture, too. Too good! I—well, for various reasons I've never printed it."

" Larry! You don't mean—it—it wasn't *that* night ——"

The boy nodded soberly. " I'm afraid it was."

" But—oh, it couldn't be. Steve wouldn't lie! He couldn't have come back."

" Well, my picture and Leslie both say he did."

Afterward Elen discovered that the nails of one hand had dug into her palm. She steadied her lip by biting it. Steve —— Oh, no, no! She didn't believe it. She never would believe it.

Larry was saying, in that queer, steady voice: " I don't believe Steve knows anything more about that bowl than I do. But he *did* do something that night he doesn't want to admit he did. That's why I've never run the risk of printing that picture."

Elen clutched his arm. " Larry, have you still got the negative? " At his nod she raced on. " Go home and print it! Hurry! Don't you see it may show who the person really was? "

Larry looked at the sky, at the garden, and then pityingly at Elen. He whistled softly, picked up his camera and shook his head.

" Larry—please! "

" Be it on your own head," he grunted.

The next day was remorselessly long. Elen tried to study, and, failing lamentably, tried to concentrate on the birds—on anything in fact, without success. She listened to Miss Lawson, the teacher Sam Howe High sent to teach her English and history, lecture her about wasting her own and a tutor's time, and assented meekly, but her eyes were on her watch. It would be four o'clock before she could expect Larry. And it was fifteen minutes after when he arrived, even more sober than he had been yesterday.

" Well, I made the print, but it doesn't alter the situation. Are you very sure you want to see it? " he asked.

Elen nodded wordlessly, and suddenly found herself with a picture in her hands. The snapshot of a boyish figure silhouetted against the light coming from the Herrick front door. It would not have been possible of course to get the likeness, even if the person had not been facing the doorway, but the figure was clad in a distinctive way—trousers tight-fitting at the hips, then flaring, and in again at the knees. And the figure did unmistakably have the look of Steve.

Somewhere in the garden young blue jays set up a raucous call. The shrill sound broke the spell. Elen felt a wave of obstinacy rise up within her.

" Who is it? " she demanded. " Who looks so terribly much like Steve? "

12

Further Complications

THE April breeze sent a swirl of rosy maple blossoms into Elen's lap. From somewhere startlingly near an oriole burst into a gay cascade of song. Elen and Larry were not aware of either happening. Larry crushed an iris blade and looked off toward the terrace with a bleak expression, and Elen, always gifted with the uncanny ability to see a matter from another person's viewpoint, sighed.

"Yes, I know, you think I'm being downright obstinate."

"Well, aren't you?"

The breeze moved over the rows of iris. Never again would Elen be able to go through a garden in the spring and see stately cream-and-brown colored iris sway in the wind without remembering the dismayed and sick sensation she had that moment as she tried to give the condemning photograph an impartial scrutiny.

Who, besides Stephen Herrick, would be standing before the open Herrick door at a time when none of the family were at home? Who, besides Steve, would have come attired in the uniform worn by the drivers of the Kay-Bee grocery delivery cars? Oh, but if this *was* a picture of Steve, he had played false to the trust and faith of his family and friends! If he *had* gone home that night, he must have had an innocent reason for doing it. And why didn't he confess it?

She shivered and choked. Something was wrong with that picture, somehow. All wrong. And yet—and yet ——

"Larry, did you speak to Steve that night?"

Larry shook his head. "No. I came along just as he was going in, and took the picture, that's all. I meant to show it to him afterward, he'd been with me when I foozled other night shots, so I wasn't saying anything to him until I had something good, and then of course ——"

"Did you see his car?"

Larry laughed shortly. "Hey, what is this? Am I on the witness stand? After all, that happened in December. I don't remember—hold on, yes, I do! The street was clear, because I crossed in the middle of the block."

"Very sensible of Steve to park a grocery car out of sight and then come home," Elen commented sarcastically. "I must ask Leslie if she saw the car." She looked at the photograph again. "Larry! If Steve was just going in, how could the light be on in the hall ahead of him?"

Larry gave a quick sigh of relief. "*That* one I can answer. Mrs. Raymond, the woman who built this place, was always afraid of a dark house. So she had a switch put by the front door which turns on the inside hall light. Anything more you're dubious about?"

Elen shook her head. No, everything was becoming too pitifully plain. Yet—even now she had a nagging conviction—the figure in that snapshot wasn't Steve! It wasn't!

"Larry," she said in a very small voice, "I think you ought to show Steve this picture ——"

A very determined hand reached out and removed it from her fingers. Larry's face was suddenly like granite, although his voice was soft. "So? Well, I happen to think differently. And I think you promised to say nothing about it?" At Elen's nod he rose from the garden bench where he had been sitting and thrust the picture out of sight. "You think my camera was fooled someway, don't you?" he challenged.

Elen drew a long breath. "I—I think ——" she began, and then flung out her hands in a hopeless little gesture. "Larry," she said with desperate honesty, "I don't know what I *think!* I only *know* that isn't Steve. I'm not just being contrary, but that person *isn't* Steve!"

The boy looked at her queerly. Then he said, "Well, the Herricks all claim to be stubborn, but—Len, I wish you'd make me another promise: If ever I get into a mess, with all the evidence against me, will you believe in me as you do in Steve?"

Had Steve known what new evidence against him Elen had seen that afternoon, he couldn't have been in a more tight-lipped and taciturn mood than he was when he came to wheel Elen back to the house. Elen took one look at his bleak face and wondered what new blow he had had that day.

"Steve! Did you see that frog jump in the pool? He's the first one I've seen!"

"Our frogs have a habit of jumping," Steve remarked rather ungraciously. "That's nothing to shout over!"

Elen tried again. "I think two sets of wrens are quarreling over your birdhouse by the crimson rambler."

Steve grunted. "They show poor sense. That rambler will be too convenient for that black imp of a Sheba. By the way, Len, perhaps you'd like a little warning: We're having company for dinner. Aunt Serena just arrived."

Elen looked at him and felt decidedly limp. Since her first encounter with Miss Serena Herrick, she had learned to laugh at the lady's anxious remarks—but—she laughed at them a day or two after they were made, and her visits always left the whole family a bit let down or ruffled in temper.

Aunt Claire helped Elen slip into a new dainty dress of aqua-green, and watched with approval while Elen brushed her hair into the new mode Sally had taught her, before they went into the dining-room for dinner.

Aunt Serena came over and kissed her affectionately. "My dear, I do hope you are as well as you look! Perhaps Allan Knight is right, and that you won't be a confirmed invalid. Last month I had my doubts if you'd ever go beyond that one room!"

"And now she roams the garden!" said Aunt Claire gaily; "lives there almost every pleasant day."

Aunt Serena shook her head in a disapproving way. "That's very pleasant, I've no doubt, but it doesn't sound very wise to me. The jar of wheeling you back and forth, my dear, must be very bad for your back. And gardens are *so* apt to be damp in spring. If you should get rheumatism at this stage ——" Her voice indicated Elen would be a hopeless case forever after.

"Allan wants me to be out in the garden," said Elen demurely.

Miss Serena looked a little pained, and smiled sadly. "I hope he is doing the right thing." Her gentle voice was full of gloomy misgiving. Had she known that it was in the garden, that very morning, that Elen had stood erect on her own feet for the first time since her accident, supported by Aunt Claire and Allan Knight, she would have been shocked to the core. It was just as well for her peace of mind that the news was withheld!

Sally's entrance diverted Miss Serena's attention. Sally, unfortunately, was suffering from a cold. Her eyes were red and swollen, her lips puffed, and, as Tom unfeelingly said, her nose could have been used as a traffic signal! Aunt Serena viewed this apparition with not unjustified alarm.

"Oh, my dear! You must be horribly ill! Claire, it's positively dangerous for this child to be out of bed!"

"It's all in my looks—and voice," muttered Sally in a cracked voice. "I feel grand, really I do."

"Sally's colds seem to know instinctively that her complexion is her vulnerable spot," agreed her mother. "She's a fearful sight, I know, and she doesn't sound pretty, but she's really quite fit for home society."

Aunt Serena pursed her lips. "I don't wish to alarm you, Sally dear, but it looks to me like a case of measles."

"You don't," Sally managed to creak. "I've had them twice!"

"Oh, no!" Aunt Serena was gentle but firm in her contradiction. "No one has them twice, my dear."

Sally looked ominous. "Did you have them twice, Aunt Serena? Well, *I* did, so I've done the impossible."

It could not be said that the Herricks especially enjoyed their dinner that night, delicious as it was.

"Claire, you are getting entirely too thin ——"

"Dear Aunt Serena, I weigh five pounds more than I did last spring."

"Billy, I hope it isn't true that the Museum is considering accepting the Noncleif collection of Shakespeare folios? The responsibility will be too much for you!"

When Tommy, who had become very much bored with the woeful tenor of the dinner conversation, upset his glass of water, and having sopped it up to the best of his ability, asked to be excused, in order to hear his favorite sports broadcast, Miss Serena looked after him sadly. "No child of mine would be allowed to listen to those broadcasts—all a jumble of names and scores—too fast for the little minds to follow. Well, Stephen, I understand you did a bit of broadcasting yourself the other night. Very well done, too. The school must have been proud of you. But I can see it was a strain. When vacation comes, if you are interested in taking that ship's position, I believe I could still manage ——"

"No ship would want me," said Steve. "I get seasick."

"Speaking of being sick," Aunt Serena began to eat her cream pie with more relish than the rest of the family were exhibiting, "have you heard about poor Miss Page? She was stricken with appendicitis last week, and the doctors say she was in such an undernourished condition that ——" She finished with another forlorn shake of her head. Watching Miss Serena's head was beginning to make Elen dizzy.

"She'll pull through," Steve assured his startled family. "She's all right today."

"How might *you* know?" Aunt Serena laid down her fork and looked at him with amazed round eyes.

"Because I ——" Steve reddened and fumbled with his napkin. "Well, because I went to see her today. And I asked the doctor."

Perhaps it was no wonder the family gasped. Aunt Serena had another dart to send: "I shouldn't have thought she would have wanted to see *you.*"

Elen's breath came in unconscious sharpness. How could anyone be so cruel? But Steve was answering in a flat, steady voice: "Perhaps she didn't. But there were things I had to tell her. Dad, could I have a talk with you now?"

"You are both excused," said Aunt Claire softly.

They went upstairs, but the conference wasn't a short affair. It was so long, in fact, that a disgruntled Tommy had to escort Aunt Serena home. When Uncle Billy and Steve did reappear, the father had his arm around his son's shoulder. Steve's face was tired, but his chin was up with its old free lift and his eyes were shining.

"Stephen," said Uncle Billy distinctly, "has been telling me quite a long story. I'll shorten it for you: He has been hearing that worry and lack of food caused Miss Page's illness, and that he is to blame because he lost her bowl. If she had had it, she could have sold it. She could, but I doubt if she would have tried, because she refused to sell it to me for the Museum, or to Mr. Britten. At any rate, she is forlorn and ill now, and people look at Steve with suspicion ——"

" But he isn't responsible! " Sally cried eagerly. " Her own lawyer told you ——"

Uncle Billy nodded gravely. " Yes. I know. Steve is a minor, he took the bowl under protest, and he certainly wasn't paid to take care of it. As we see it, if anybody was responsible for the bowl's loss, it was Anne, but she and John Springstead do not see it that way. And so, since it has come to the point where Steve feels he will not be able to meet the world squarely unless he makes reparation, well ——"

" Father has given me permission to sell my clock," said Steve simply.

His three listeners had known it was coming. But when he said it, something reached out and caught Elen by the throat. Sally suddenly looked genuinely sick and forlorn. It was Aunt Claire who spoke swiftly:

" Stephen, I'm proud of you! "

13

Three Question Marks

THE clock spoke three times. Elen burrowed her head in her pillow and pressed her fingers over the exposed ear to escape the sound. She had been hearing that clock call the hours from midnight on. Ordinarily, when the desperate doubts and fears she had learned to hold at bay during the day closed in upon her in the dark, she had welcomed the sound as a token of companionship through the night, but tonight its vibrant voice seemed to be a mocking echo of Stephen's word—" sell " !

That was too drastic a way out! And yet—and yet—yes, she could see why Steve felt goaded into doing it. Made miserable by months of accusations from Miss Page, haunted by suspicions and insinuations, and finally shocked and sickened by the knowledge that Miss Page was ill, something would have broken in Stephen Herrick if he hadn't done what he could to set the matter right.

But selling the Rodney clock wouldn't do it. Selling the clock sounded very well, but it wouldn't bring the bowl to light. And there would always be people to hint and whisper that Steve Herrick ——

Elen cupped both her hands about her chin. Where, oh where *was* that hoodooed bowl? What hiding place was there in Anne Springstead's modern little house where something the size of an old-time silver bowl could elude everyone? Suppose it really wasn't there?—There was always Mr. Britten to remember, Mr. Britten who had threatened to make Steve glad to sell the Rodney clock, Mr. Britten who had overheard Steve's comments on the bowl. If you took Mr. Britten into consideration ——

Where did it get you? Mr. Britten simply didn't fit into the puzzle at all.

But why, for the love of Pat, wasn't the thing in the refrigerator where Anne had told Leslie she was putting it? Had something happened to change her mind? If Elen had been in Anne's place, where would she have hidden it?—No, that didn't work. You couldn't select a logical hiding place in a house you'd never seen.

The most idiotic thing in the whole senseless tangle was Anne's insistence that she had given the bowl back to Steve, when Steve had been at the other side of Meredith delivering groceries for the Kay-Bee people. What was it Larry had called Anne? "Fluffy-brained"? She certainly sounded so. Unless—unless ——

Yes, unless Elen looked the facts squarely in the face and admitted that all the evidence pointed to the ugly fact that Steve *had* returned home that night, even though he denied it. Elen took a long breath, clenched her teeth and her fingers as she used to do in her early days at St. Luke's, and forced herself to admit that everything pointed in that direction. The incriminating picture she had seen that afternoon —— What, actually, did it show? Somebody standing in an open door. There was only Leslie's and Larry's word that the figure had been Steve. It might have been someone—anyone else ——

" Steady, now, Len Herrick! " Elen admonished herself. " You know better than that. The house was empty. Just ' anybody ' couldn't have unlocked the door. And that figure was in uniform. Be fair."

Her own argument made her a little sick. If it had been Steve why didn't he acknowledge what he'd done? What was he concealing? And who but Steve would have darted into the house, out and away again like a hunted thing?

It might have been a trick picture—one negative imposed over the other. It *might* have been—but it wasn't. Larry was too loyal a friend of Steve. He believed in him, even though he had a piece of evidence against him which no one else possessed.—Suddenly Elen heard again Larry's slow inquiry, " Len, if ever I get into a mess, with all the evidence against me, will you believe in me as you do in Steve? "

" The next thing you know," Elen was addressing herself sarcastically, " you'll be suspecting Larry of doing the whole thing. I suppose you think perhaps Miss Page asked him to cut her lawn or shovel her snow, and then wouldn't pay him, so he got even by taking the bowl. You'd better snap out of it! "

Well, if it was Steve in that picture ——

But it wasn't! It wasn't! Ever since she had seen it she had been in an obstinate mood. It just wasn't Steve, that was all.

"And that helps matters, doesn't it?" moaned Elen. It didn't. Not in the least.

She lay watching the movements of the delicate new maple leaves as the moon silhouetted them against her window shades. They looked like little dancing figures, lovely as a Japanese pattern. Sometimes they lulled Elen into slumber, but sleep had fled far away tonight. Hour after hour Elen struggled with her three persistent question marks—Did Steve know more than he acknowledged he did? How could the person in the picture be anyone but Steve? Above everything else, where *was* the bowl?

And once Elen had enjoyed a reputation for liking puzzles!

Dawn was reaching bright fingers across the starlit sky before the merry-go-round of questions finally faded from Elen's head and she tumbled headlong into sleep, and slept until a high trill of swelling jubilant notes interrupted her dream in which she had just discovered the bowl in the back of Larry's camera. The song and the dream went on together for a few seconds, then her eyes came open and she blinked at the golden flood of light from the window opposite her bed. Aunt Claire, standing beside her, laughed.

"You were sleeping so beautifully that I didn't have the heart to disturb you. So I just opened the windows and let Pitti Sing do it for me! He certainly was effective.—That's an idea, Elen. You might start a business training canaries to burst into song the minute the morning sun strikes them, just as you did Pitti Sing. Much nicer than an alarm clock."

Elen giggled. " All I'd have to do would be to train the sun to strike them at the right time." She looked up at the yellow-and-ebony Pitti Sing who was still pouring forth a loud and vigorous song. " You needn't sound so scornful, Pitti Sing. You probably woke up three minutes before you disturbed me. Oh, well "—as the melody broke into a cascade of short, derisive notes—" have it your own way." She suddenly propped herself on her elbows and sniffed excitedly. " Aunt Claire! What makes the air so heavenly this morning? "

" It does seem rather like something from Heaven, doesn't it? " Aunt Claire agreed seriously. " Today—well, the only way I can express it is to say that spring is articulate with fragrance. As if all the different perfumes from the woods and the hills and orchards had blended together. We have them once or twice each spring, I think. Days you'd like to hold forever."

Elen's eyes were soft. " Maybe you do have them in Meredith, but all we had in Delmar when the wind came from the south was the lovely aroma from the soap factory! The Dean's wife and I used to have spring picnics in the woods, but "—she put out her hand as if to touch something tangible—" this is something different."

Such a soft blue sky, with the sunlight filtering through the rosy-green young leaves outside, and coming through the windows to lay bright fingers on the bronze profiles of Washington and Lincoln which stood at either end of her favorite row of books, and then slipped across the room to make little dancing lights in the glass bowl which housed her supply of water plants. And the warmly fragrant air —— Oh, what might not happen on a day like this! Last night the bowl mystery had hovered over her like a dark nightmare. But today was made for joy. It was a well-guarded secret, but she was to begin practicing walking!

All the Herricks did not find the day made for joy. Tommy, so it appeared when the family assembled for breakfast, was in a state of injured indignation because his brother had just confiscated all his marbles. Definitely Sally's cold was worse. One could almost see the ache in her eyes and sense the effort it required to hold up her head. She made a weary little grimace over her orange juice, pushed it away, and continued what apparently had been a pre-breakfast argument with Steve in a shrill, cracked voice.

" But can't you see it's a wacky thing to do? Just wacky? Because Miss Page's bowl disappears *after* you got rid of it, you sell the Rodney ——" She ended with a little wail. " Why doesn't somebody shake some sense into you? "

Steve grinned. " Because it can't be done, dear lady! "

" I don't know nothing about that ol' bowl," Tommy cut in belligerently, " but you swiped my marbles, and I'm going to know the reason why, or ——"

Stephen had his old debonair assurance this morning. He met his small brother's dark scowl with irritating nonchalance: " Perhaps I had a yearning to try my hand at marbles again. Or . . . Perhaps I decided that your spelling might improve if they were out of your reach for a few days ——"

Tommy choked, flushed and glowered like a small powder keg. Aunt Claire gave a quiet warning. " Steve! "

Steve grinned at her and then spoke quickly. " You know perfectly well why you lost them, Tom. I told you twice before not to shoot them in the hall near the clock, and the first thing I saw this morning ——"

" I was shooting away from your old clock."

" Quite right," agreed Steve. " And you'll shoot them still farther away in the future. I don't propose to try to sell a damaged heirloom."

" Steve, if you *do* sell that clock "—Sally's eyes were growing fever-bright—" you'll be a disgrace—it isn't fair to the rest of us! "

Perhaps Steve really had not observed the danger-signals in his sister's face this morning. Or perhaps his own feelings were keyed to too high a pitch. At any rate his next remark did sound a little flippant:

" Why? I can get an electric clock which will do just as well—save me the bother of winding it, too."

Even Uncle Billy looked startled, and poor Sally burst into tears. Aunt Claire was on her feet.

" Come away, Sally girl. Billy, will you call Allan? "

" It isn't measles! " sobbed Sally as she staggered to her feet. " I tell you I've had 'em *twice!* It's this horrid clock business! "

It wasn't measles, but it was a sudden and violent form of the grippe, Allan told them twenty minutes later.

" She isn't dangerously ill, but she's going to be pretty low and miserable for a few days," he informed the sobered family. " Someone transported a mean germ into the junior class of Sam Howe. Don't be too alarmed when her fever starts aiming for the sky. With the care she's going to get," he smiled at Aunt Claire, "nothing disastrous will happen. If you're all on guard, you'll be safe."

"Claire will be pretty busy," Uncle Billy murmured. "Should we"—he paused unhappily—"should we—ask Aunt Serena to come over for a few days?"

"I can cook," said Steve hastily. "You know I can, Moms!"

"I certainly could do the dishes," volunteered Elen. "And answer the phone."

"I'll sweep and dust!" Tommy proclaimed loudly. "Aw, don't let's have Aunt Serena! She'll make us all dizzy."

In a twinkling all arguments and grievances were forgotten. The bowl mystery and the prospective sale of the clock, even Elen's achievement of standing upright once again, were brushed aside. The only important thing in the world for the Herricks was doing their best for the stricken Sally, who by this time was so thoroughly racked by pain and fever that she scarcely realized she had a family.

Aunt Claire smiled gravely at the anxious faces. "No," she said slowly, "I don't think it would be right to bring Aunt Serena in just now. She's too susceptible to infection of this kind. We can manage, I'm sure. If things get a bit too thick for us, we'll get that nice Black Jinny Sims for a few days."

With Uncle Billy gone, and Steve and Tommy having taken a rather reluctant departure for school, the breathless silence which comes to a house when sickness strikes settled down over the Herrick home. Aunt Claire was with Sally, and Elen, in the kitchen, wrestled with the dishes. When they were finished and neatly stacked, Elen wheeled herself back through the rooms, got a jacket, and trundled herself to her own porch. It required quite a bit of negotiation, but she managed it. She looked wistfully out toward the garden. In a month's time she might be walking those few hundred feet, but just now it might have been across the continent for all she could reach it of her own accord. Perhaps this afternoon, if Larry came, or Leslie ——

No, that wouldn't do. There might be a dozen ways to make herself useful, and the garden was much too far away.—She started as Aunt Claire appeared. " So you managed for yourself! Good girl. I wondered ——" She held out a fat envelope. " This letter just came from Anne. I thought possibly you'd like to read it, and have it deciphered in time to read it to me at lunch."

Anne Springstead's envelopes were always addressed in a not too unreadable and rather distinguished looking scrawl. The letters themselves, long and newsy ones, were written in a series of weird and unfinished symbols which, as Sally had once complained, were a cross between shorthand at its worst and cuneiform writing, which resolved itself into plain English after only much study and patience. Elen, being used to Uncle Mark's deplorably bad pen-scratching, usually could translate Anne's letters faster than Anne's own relatives.

This letter lay untouched for several minutes. Elen was not at all sure she wanted to be reminded of Anne Springstead today. Finally she reached for an envelope opener from the little porch table, and slit the flap. A snapshot tumbled out first of all, a snapshot which, after a minute or two, she discovered was labeled " Bonnie Prince Charlie and A. S." Elen turned it over and found herself staring at the picture of a young person in riding habit, her back to the camera, her arms raised to caress the horse before her. She stood in an open doorway, and suddenly Elen was remembering another picture of another figure standing in a doorway—or was it " another " figure?

" Why—why ——" gasped Elen, suddenly possessed of the feeling that all the thoughts she had ever had were whirling about her head. " It—it was *Anne!* Anne in her riding habit! Now what do you know about that? "

Anne had been the mysterious visitor on that fateful December night, and not Steve at all. It hadn't simply been an exhibition of unreasoning Herrick stubbornness when she refused to take Larry's picture at its face value. She had only been right. Something about that figure hadn't been like Steve. Something she couldn't quite define —— Oh, it didn't matter. Nothing mattered now except that Steve would be free from the ugly suspicions ——

And if Anne had come that night she had hidden the bowl in the Herrick house ——

Despite Sally's illness a tingling wave of exulting triumph swept over Elen. *Now* she really had something to work on! She must see Larry this afternoon. They had to compare those two photographs, and then ——!

14

The Bowl Doesn't Matter

ALL through luncheon Aunt Claire held herself alert for any sounds from Sally's room. She explained to Elen a bit ruefully: "Sally's in for a hectic bout. She always seems to go the limit when she's ill. Once she was in bed three weeks with a case of ivy poisoning, and last spring Allan said her mumps were bigger and better than any other mumps he'd ever seen! I know this attack probably isn't desperate, but she's pretty miserable, and when Sally has a fever, her ideas are apt to be somewhat fuzzy."

There were no ominous sounds, however, and Aunt Claire lingered over her meal while Elen read Anne Springstead's vivacious account of a camping trip she and her husband had taken with another young couple, on which, for minor excitement, they had had a small earthquake, watched their camp stove explode, and had Anne's horse run away! Aunt Claire really chuckled as Elen read:

"That's what comes of trusting princes! Warning, my good family, never put your faith in royalty. My new horse is Stonewall Jackson, guaranteed, positively, to be tried and true—but oh, so dull! The Bonnie Prince was so sweet and gallant, as you can see by our picture."

"He—he *is* gallant and—and royal." Elen's observation sounded a little stumbling. "Would you mind—could I keep it on my desk for a few days, Aunt Claire? I—I—well, I can't tell you just why, but ——"

For once Aunt Claire plainly misunderstood. She looked at Elen, with her cheeks faintly tanned and touched with the pink of dawn, and remembered the girl who had stood on the threshold of the cabin at Lake Pakawake, blithe and eager, waiting for Larry Peel to appear with their horses ready and saddled for their morning rides. She remembered how that girl would return, cheeks rosy, grey eyes deep with the joy of the day's adventuring, her voice soft and awed as she told of the fresh discoveries she had made on the trail. This other girl—this other horse, reasoned Aunt Claire, must represent all the freedom and joy and out-of-door exploration which had been denied Elen these past weary months. She spoke with quick sympathy:

"Yes, I know what you mean, dear. It gives me the same feeling—he's splendid, and strong, and glad to be alive. Keep it permanently, if you like."

Elen restrained a little grin.

She propped the snapshot where she could see and study it while she did the few luncheon dishes. The more she observed it the stronger grew her impression that the person in Larry's picture was Anne also.—She was growing too excited to wonder, just then, why Anne would arrive at the Herrick door at eight in the evening wearing her riding habit, and how she had gained entry to the house. *That* was to come later! Now she had a soaring conviction that the solution to the whole baffling affair was very close. The first step was to compare the two photographs. She must reach Larry this afternoon ——

Aunt Claire, passing by with a glass of chilled fruit juice for Sally, noticed her absorption in the picture, and touched her shoulder gently.

" Don't look so, Len! You'll be doing the same thing in a year or two—I'm sure of it! "

Elen started. " What?—Oh—ride? " She let her shoulders droop. " By the time I'm old and grey perhaps I'll get around to it again." Privately she admitted the remark sounded a little silly, but if Aunt Claire thought it was the horse that had caught her attention ——

With Aunt Claire gone her brain took up the refrain it had begun in the morning. " This afternoon—this afternoon ——"

This afternoon they could be really sure of the identity of the person Larry and Leslie had both seen. This afternoon —— Elen hugged herself in excitement.

Perhaps Larry would come home with Steve. If he didn't she would phone ——

But Steve returned alone, and he brought the discomfiting report that Larry had gone for an airplane ride from the city airport.

" Oh," said Elen heavily.

Larry had mentioned the invitation from the aviator his family knew. The man had offered to take Larry with him on some afternoon flight, and give him an opportunity to make aerial photographs. But why had they had to go *today?*

Steve was frowning as he discarded his sweater and enveloped himself in a gaily decorated blue-and-orange apron. "He shouldn't have gone. He's got one lemon of a cold. I told him any nitwit would know enough to go home and go to bed instead of making pictures from an airplane, and he said ——"

Elen grinned faintly. Knowing Larry, she could guess what retort he had made! "He probably said, 'But you see *I'm* not a nitwit!'"

"He did," Steve acknowledged with a grunt.

Premonition, chill and miserable, settled like a leaden weight against Elen's chest. Larry *mustn't* be ill—not just now! Aunt Claire had just brought down a list of articles she needed for Sally, and Elen had been about to telephoned the drugstore. The paper crumpled in her fingers, and she looked so odd that Steve shot her an inquiring glance. "What's up with you? You look green.—Don't tell me this lovely germ is biting *you?*"

Elen managed to shake her head in vehement denial. "Nothing's up. Just the combination of you and that gorgeous apron."

Steve observed her quizzically. "You were never cut out to be a good deceiver," he remarked cheerfully. "Since you claim not to admire my outfit, I'll retire to the kitchen."

Left alone, Elen scowled at Anne Springstead's back. With Anne's picture as a clue it had seemed as if all the pieces of the puzzle must fall into place, but everything depended on comparing this snapshot with Larry's picture, and if Larry Peel should be ill ——

She didn't dare phone him tonight, for fear of rousing Steve's suspicions still more, but she would send him an urgent note in the morning.

That note was not destined to reach Larry's hands for many weary days. When Allan made his mid-morning call on Sally the next day he brought the word Elen had feared: Larry was the latest victim of the grippe infection!

Now there was nothing to do but wait, wait until Larry was well.

The pall of anxiety which hung like a tangible thing over the Herrick household during the next week made everything except Sally's battle against infection seem very trivial. They had been warned by Allan, of course, to expect the quick flare of high fever and all the attendant miseries which a vicious attack of grippe can bring, but it was soon plain that this was no ordinary illness. This was the treacherous disease at its worst.

Suddenly the Herrick family was a compact little world, with every member ready and willing for emergency duty. With Aunt Claire nursing Sally, Steve took over the cooking and general housework. Elen kept herself near the telephone, and Tommy became general errand boy.

For three days the Herricks went on their way with determined cheerfulness and stout hearts. Then late in the third afternoon Steve, carrying fruit juice to Sally's room, suddenly had a terrifyingly clear sight of her face, and fell back appalled. How could anything in three short days have turned Sally who was a slender dynamo of vitality into this tortured young person with the fever-glazed cheeks, and the set, unseeing eyes?

Befogged by fever though she was, Sally was somehow aware of the new presence in her room. Painfully she turned her head and asked huskily:

"Who—is it?"

"Steve, dear. He brought you fresh pineapple juice."

The bright head made a negative gesture, and the voice grew sharper. "It's not Steve! I—I know now. It's an agent—from Mr. Britten—buy the clock! Why doesn't somebody—stop—him!"

Steve clutched at the door handle and stared at his mother in horror. "Is—is she—has she looked like this all the time?"

Aunt Claire shook her head, her eyes serious. "No," she said briefly. "You'd better go now, Steve."

Did his mother mean Sally had grown worse? Steve carried a stricken heart downstairs, and Elen, waiting for him, was frightened by his white face. "Steve ——"

"I—Sally took me for an agent of Mr. Britten's come to buy the clock," said Steve flatly.

Elen gave an exclamation of pity. Steve's face was set so hard she looked away, quickly. Then something impelled her to turn back and put her hand on his arm. Her voice was quick and comforting.

"Don't be hurt, Steve! She didn't know she said it!"

Steve moved his head wearily. "I'm not hurt—that way. But it looked to me as though she was—changing into someone who wasn't—Sally. I—I think I'm afraid of something, Len."

Slow, pressing, wordless terror seemed to have slunk into the room with the coming of the heavy spring dusk.

Elen's fingers tightened on Steve's arm, but she didn't speak. Something had clamped itself too tightly about her throat.

An hour later Allan Knight came for his evening visit. Five minutes after he had entered Sally's room he was on his way downstairs, striding through the hall to the phone on Uncle Billy's desk, and in crisp tones Elen, Steve and Uncle Billy heard him summon a nurse.

"Tomorrow will tell whether we need more help," he remarked quietly as he replaced the instrument. "No one could ask for a better nurse than Mrs. Herrick, but she mustn't be allowed to wear herself out. This may be a hard pull for Sally."

Elen knew she caught her breath, and she thought Steve made a choking sound. Sally's father's face was grave, but he did not flinch.

"The child is dangerously ill, Allan?"

Allan Knight had a reputation of being forthright and straight from the shoulder with his patients and their relatives whenever it was possible. Now he met Uncle Billy's gaze steadily, and spoke frankly: "It's rather a nasty germ and seems to have all its tentacles tightly around Sally. But we'll fight it off."

"Is it—pneumonia?"

Allan shook his head with reassuring swiftness. "No. And if I have anything to say it won't be. We're going to be on our guard every minute. That's why I want Mary Cantine. She's one of my best."

At first sight there seemed nothing particularly remarkable about the nurse who arrived in an amazingly short time. Elen had a sudden feeling of disappointment and doubt as Steve brought her into the room where his father was waiting. " One of the best? " This angular, mouselike person, with ash-colored hair strained back from a narrow face?

If Uncle Billy had any doubts they were well concealed. " Miss Cantine? " he said with quiet cordiality. " We are glad you could come to us."

One would not have guessed, from the taut way in which Mary Cantine held her mouth when in repose, that she possessed a smile, winsome and reassuring at the same time. Hearing her speak, even for the first time, people instinctively relaxed, just as Elen did now. It was a singularly lovely voice, clear, with a surprising lilt, indescribably warm with strength and understanding.

" Thee is the little girl's father? Yes, I am Mary Cantine, at thy service."

Perhaps it was the unexpectedness of the Quaker speech, but, somehow, on Mary Cantine's lips, the old-fashioned phrase seemed to have a real depth of meaning!

Somehow it seemed only natural for Elen to take a slow easy breath, after all the quick shallow ones she had been drawing for the past few hours. She noticed that the white lines about Steve's mouth had faded a little when she looked at him after Uncle Billy had escorted Mary Cantine upstairs. A little later he came down to report that Sally had accepted Miss Cantine's presence trustingly, and that Aunt Claire was on her way to bed, and, it was to be hoped, the first peaceful sleep she had known for three weary nights.

Perhaps Aunt Claire had it, but the intermittent, dream-spoiled sleep which came to Elen that night could not be called peaceful. Once she started awake, breathless and desperate after a dream in which Sally, ill as she was, pursued two men who were loading Steve's clock into a moving-van. At other times the dreams were a vague kaleidoscope of trouble.

In the morning Aunt Claire phoned for Black Jinny Sims to come and take over the cooking and housework. Not, as she said, because the family had suffered from the effects of Steve's cooking, but because it was too great a strain for him to undertake the family's meals and continue attending school. Sally was certainly no worse this morning.

Elen could guess she was no better. She knew the meaning of that cheerful, non-committal look which both Allan and Mary Cantine were wearing. Not for nothing had she been a resident of St. Luke's Hospital for four months.

In the afternoon Sally's fever soared to new heights. Elen, oppressed by the fear which seemed to be steadily creeping closer, steadied her voice and gave careful messages over the telephone:

"Yes, Aunt Serena. . . . Well, you know how you feel when you have the grippe. . . . No, it isn't pneumonia. . . . Aunt Claire says Sally has a high fever on the slightest excuse. . . . Oh, yes, Allan brought a nurse. Mary Cantine. She's lovely. Sally likes her. No, no, Aunt Serena. Uncle Billy said to tell you he forbids you to come."

And to Leslie's mother, "Aunt Claire isn't here just now, Mrs. Spafford. I know she'll like to know you called. . . . I'm afraid Sally feels rather uncomfortable, but we hope by tomorrow . . . Thank you!"

What did they hope for Sally by tomorrow?

Tommy, coming in late in the afternoon, stood and looked at her with troubled eyes.

"There's something *queer* in this house, Len," he said in a half-whisper. "What is it? I don't like it!"

Elen's fingers tightened about the arm of her chair. She shook her head. It was Mary Cantine, who had come softly down the stairs for ice to replenish Sally's ice-cap, who answered him:

"It's trouble, my son. But keep a bold heart, and pray to the good God. He can make thy sister stronger than any infection."

Tommy stared after her soberly. "She—she sounded as though she knew!" His tone was awed. "I—I guess I'd better go do it."

"Perhaps we'd both better do it," said Elen softly.

Bold of heart—that was what Allan had said one day last winter. She had never felt farther from it.

Just at dusk, the time Elen had come to dread, because it seemed so full of unseen things which dragged at her courage, Leslie came.

"No, I'm not afraid at all!" she said in answer to Elen's startled look. "I—I came because I thought—if it won't disturb Sally, would you like me to play a little? It—it's the only thing I know how to do to help ——"

Elen hadn't known until then how close she was to tears. She flung them out of her eyes, and tried to say "Please!" Leslie must have caught the words from her lips, for there was no sound.

She played softly, but somehow courage and faith and even a little hope filled the room. Listening, Elen wondered if music were not the most perfect form of prayer.

It was almost dark when Leslie ceased, but the silence which succeeded the music was not filled with insidious and sinister things. Leslie rose, crossed the room swiftly, said, "I—I hope it will be a *good* night, Len!" hesitated, and then did a completely unforeseen thing. Before Elen could recover from her astonishment, she was gone.

Leslie—Leslie Bradstreet—of all people—giving her a kiss!

It was the next afternoon when, so slowly, it seemed as though it must be reluctant to let go its hold, Sally's fever began to slide downward. On through the night it fell, and like a miracle, all through the next day, while her family waited anxiously to see if it would flare again.

Once she broke the hold of the infection, Sally's strides back to health were as rapid as her surrender to illness had been. By the end of the week Sally, limp, gaunt-faced, and more or less what her father called "a poor edition of the original Sally Herrick," could be propped against her pillows, and had recovered enough to grimace at sight of the bowl of broth brought in by Mary Cantine, while she announced in a reasonably strong voice:

"Please take it away! I feel as though my legs were *filled* with broths and my arms had turned into fruit juice! *I* want a juicy steak and a baked potato!"

15

"In Every Failure"

ELEN'S chair bounced over the edge of the brick walk, made a jerky half-turn, bumped into the foot of the little table under the tree and came to a scraping stop. The strong little hands on the back of the chair tightened their hold so convulsively that Elen took a sudden tilt backward. She laughed at the frightened expression on the faces of the two small boys behind her.

"We've arrived, Tom. Halt!"

"Gee!" Tommy's funny deep voice was chagrined and anxious. "We made a pretty bum job of *that,* all right. I—I hope Mom didn't see us."

"I guess it didn't do for both of us to try to steer the dumb thing," Tommy's towheaded companion admitted, as he dragged the back of his hand across his flushed face, "but it looked so easy ——"

"Well—do you think the—the bumpings will make the pain come back?" Tommy's dark eyes were wide and his brows drawn together in the comical scowl he always had when especially serious.

Elen gave him a reassuring grin. "Listen, Tom-my-boy, you needn't mention it to anyone, but I think I enjoyed being bumped. I've been pretty tired of being treated like broken glass! Now run along. I've got to go into conference with this history book before Miss Lawson comes to give me a test this afternoon." She made such a wry face that Tommy scowled afresh.

"Of course girls always fuss over trifles," he remarked to the towheaded boy thoughtfully. "It seems to be an id—an idiosyncrasy of theirs ——" He tossed off his prize word airily, and the startled Elen gulped. "But Steve sets up just as big a howl over history. I've about decided not to take it."

"*We* won't need it," asserted Tom's companion, who, for some obscure reason, rejoiced in the nickname "Candy." "I'm gonna drive a steam shovel and you're all set to be a transport pilot. We won't have to read history."

"Try and get out of it, my fine friends," advised Elen sadly. "Well, go away and fly your model planes. Don't becloud your day by staying to watch me study!"

Candy ran up the terrace. Tommy leaped after him, and then poised in mid-air. "Sure you're all right?" he demanded anxiously. "Do you want anything more?"

"Yes," said Elen promptly. "You to scram!"

Tommy departed like a streak, outstripping Candy who had a head start.

Elen grinned as she watched. It had been sweet of the child to be so solicitous, but she had been impatient to be alone in the garden! It was so long since she had been able to come here—ten days, and gardens go from glory unto glory so rapidly in late spring. It was May now, but the weather was so warm it was genuine summer.

She drew a breath of ecstasy. The world was so gorgeous! Almost she had forgotten how exquisite the garden was, and how alive she felt out here. In the past few days the world had seemed to narrow to the confines of the Herrick house. The only affairs of importance had been the bulletins from Sally's room. She had been only automatically aware that the days were bland and the air full of joyous bird-calls, but such things hadn't counted.

They counted now. With Sally progressing so rapidly that she would come downstairs tomorrow, Mary Cantine gone, and the family swinging back to normal, Elen had suddenly been possessed of a passionate yearning for the garden. She hadn't spoken of it, but perhaps her eyes had strayed in that direction too often. Fifteen minutes ago Aunt Claire had announced:

" You've been shut up too long, Len. You've lost all your tan and your energy. The garden for you, my girl. Tommy can take you out, and I'll send Miss Lawson down when she comes."

Under both Tommy's and Candy's guidance the trip from the house to the garden was a speedy and surprising thing, but—yes, she *had* actually enjoyed the jolts!

Now that she was here—had ever there been such a sky of perfect cerulean blue with dazzling white and curling cloud-tendrils before? It was so satisfyingly beautiful that it hurt. And the garden had grown in wonders.

She could imagine the dry tinge in Miss Lawson's voice as she came upon the scene: " Ah, very lovely, yes, but how interested have you been in your history recently? "

Virtuously Elen opened the book at the proper place and read the fascinating information that in colonial days the penalty for embezzlement obliged the criminal to stand in the pillory for two hours, with his ears nailed to the board, after which his ears were cut off!

" Pleasant little habits they had in those times! " muttered Elen to herself.

A scolding wife was tied to a ducking-stool and plunged three times into the river, and if an old woman gazed too long at her neighbor's cow, she might be arrested for a witch.

All of which seemed the most utterly useless information anyone could be asked to absorb! Especially with the miracle of the garden all about her.

Still, it might be a little difficult to convince Miss Lawson of that fact! Elen resolutely took her eyes from the swarm of bees nearby and tried to grow enthusiastic over the glorious fact that on Friday, July 30, 1619, the first Legislature of the New World had met in the church at Jamestown, Virginia.

" How delightful! " groaned Elen.

Something blue flashed before her. Forgotten was Jamestown—and every other colony. The book went shut with no sound. Elen sat motionless. She had thought from the silence in the direction of the old tree that her family of bluebirds had taken flight during her absence, but here was one of the parents disappearing into the hole in the trunk. Oh—she would see the babies after all! She must!

She must make her " Bluebird Family Album " complete. If she could only make a record of the babies' first flight!

Father Bluebird emerged and flew away. From somewhere near there was the softest flutter of wings, and the mate took his place. When she left Elen heard the eager pipe of the youngsters, and thought she saw a tiny grey head at the opening. She leaned forward, and her book slid to the ground. At the same time a precise voice remarked:

" Bird study is a great aid to the perusal of American history, I observe."

Coming from Miss Lawson, this was genuine humor! The lady was actually smiling. Elen ventured to take advantage of this propitious omen.

" Well, orioles remind me of Lord Baltimore, and I believe there was a statesman named Jay ——"

" Very witty! " said Miss Lawson. " Humph! " She seated herself in the chair opposite Elen, drew her paraphernalia from her brief case and began spreading it over the small table. In the midst of unfolding a paper she stopped and her gaze went up to the hole in the tree not so many feet away.

" I used to watch bluebirds build in the fence posts on my grandfather's farm," she observed slowly. " Lovely birds. All too rare, now. You're having a wonderful opportunity. I hope you appreciate it." The hard sound had slipped away, and Elen noticed to her surprise that Miss Lawson's voice could be really musical. The teacher was hesitating, then she asked softly, " Will they—come back? "

" They have babies. I think they will," said Elen.

But they didn't. Indeed there was only a robin in sight. Miss Lawson was not their especial friend, like Elen, nor yet one of the familiar Herricks, and the bluebirds went into retreat.

When there was no further evidence of bluebird family life, Miss Lawson became her usual austere self, adjusted the glasses which made her look as Queen Victoria might have looked had she been tall and pinched of face, and proceeded to probe deeply into Elen's woeful lack of colonial history.

A history test, Elen decided ruefully, could be just as disagreeable taken in a garden as in a classroom, and one could flunk it quite as easily!

When she had floundered through the last question, and Miss Lawson, with an expression as cheerful as that of the Sphinx, had gathered up the evidence of Elen's ignorance, and departed, the girl's head dropped back limply and her eyes closed. It hadn't been any use, this struggle to keep up her junior year work. She had lost so much time at St. Luke's. Perhaps she had done well enough in some subjects, but Latin and history would surely take her down to ignominious defeat.

Someone was coming along the walk, coming very slowly. Thought her asleep, probably. Without opening her eyes, she said, " Steve? "

" No."

Elen came bolt upright, her eyes wide open. " *Larry!* When did they let you back into circulation? "

" Yesterday was the first. Today Mother was taking me for a ride, and I made her bring me here. Might I—sit down? "

Indeed he looked alarmingly shaky. Never of a heavy build, he seemed wretchedly thin, and under his brilliant hair his face held almost a transparent look. He sat down a little gingerly, as though he was afraid his knees might crack. Then he grinned, the same impishly lovable grin Larry Peel always had. It would require more than an attack of the grippe to quench that!

" Oh, I'm all right. Miles ahead of Sally, I hear. But the germ only sideswiped me, and she got a head-on collision."

" She certainly did," said Elen fervently. " Oh, Larry, I didn't know until just now how much I'd missed you."

" So? " Larry bowed gravely. " Glad you found it out sometime." Suddenly he was looking very tired. " Len—two days ago they gave me your note—you know, about the picture of the—person at the door ——"

" Yes? " Elen's breath came so short with mounting excitement it threatened to choke her. " Did you bring yours ——" Her voice died abruptly. Larry was shaking his head.

" No. I—couldn't bring it. I ——" He squared his shoulders. " Listen, Len, I felt so punk that night I came in from the airport—I knew I was going to be ill, and I honestly thought I was dying. Well, I couldn't bear to think that picture might be found among my things—evidence against Steve, so—I destroyed it."

" Oh." Elen framed the word with her lips. Then: " The negative too? "

"Yes."

"Oh."

Slowly she sat back, her eyes on the ground, her lip held hard between her teeth.

"Len ——"

She turned and lifted her head, but she didn't see him for the blur over her eyes. "Yes, I can see, Larry. I can see why you did it, but I was counting on your picture so much ——"

"Could I—could I see the other picture?" Larry sounded a little diffident.

That picture of Anne and Bonnie Prince Charlie Elen always carried in her notebook. Silently she found it, and gave it to him. Larry studied it from every angle for a long minute before he gave it back.

"Yes—it might have been," he admitted in a slow, flat voice. "But I don't see —— Why would Anne Springstead have been here dressed in her riding habit?"

Elen shook her head. "I don't know! But she was!"

"The house was locked. How could she get in?"

Elen shook her head wordlessly this time.

Only the buzzing of the bees broke the long silence while Larry meditated. Finally he asked, "Have you asked Leslie if Anne was in her habit when she saw her at her home?"

Elen's answer was reluctant. "Yes. I have. She said she wasn't."

Larry's head moved slowly. Suddenly Elen heard herself crying, "It *was* Anne, Larry! It had to be! Steve just doesn't stand like that!"

" Where's the difference? How can you be sure ——? " Abruptly he was making an urgent gesture for silence. Steve himself was flying down the terrace.

" Hi, you old bird, how are you? "

" Able to have eggs and toast instead of fruit juices, thank you. If anyone brings me more oranges they'll get socked with 'em! "

Steve grinned in appreciation. " I know. Sally deliberately upset the last glass of pineapple juice I took her. Gosh, it's good to have you around again. Guess who else is back ——"

Elen didn't hear him. Inspiration had flashed across her brain the moment before. " Steve ——" she began haltingly. " Steve ——" She stopped and swallowed while both boys looked at her curiously. Then the words came in an impetuous little rush. " I—I know this does sound wacky, but will you go get my camera, please? I—I want to take your picture."

Comprehension slowly dawned in Larry's face, but Steve's baffled and startled expression only deepened. At any other time Elen would have giggled; now she was too intent to see the humor behind the situation.

" Why this sudden hectic desire for my picture? You have that charming one where I look as though I'd been tied to the stake, and felt the first touch of fire, and the one cleaning the fish-pool, and—I take a hideous picture anyway! Are you feeling quite ——"

" Please, Steve. I told you it sounded crazy. Really, there's an awfully good reason why I want to do it. I'm not joking, am I? " she appealed to Larry.

Steve turned quizzical, inquiring eyes toward Larry, and was a little taken aback at Larry's quick, serious nod. Larry's face was as intent and keen as Elen's.

"It's on the level, all right. Go get that camera and be a good egg."

Steve stared. "*Now?*"

Larry nodded solemnly. "Yes, my son. Best not to postpone it. Of course I know it's painful, but it will be over in a second ——" He dodged the blow Steve aimed.

"You'd—you'd better take me along." Elen was a little breathless from her efforts to choke down her laughter. "You see, I want—I want you to stand in a—a certain place. By the front door."

"I hope something about this makes sense to somebody," murmured Steve pathetically. "Of course it's too much to ask you to explain ——"

"'The time will come,'" Larry sagely quoted Dr. Howard, the principal of Samuel Howe High, "'when you will realize that we have had only your welfare at heart.'"

Elen choked and Steve gave him one withering look. Then he proceeded to wheel Elen up the brick walk, around to the front of the house, and strode inside. Elen began to giggle weakly.

"None of that!" Larry cut in sharply. "You've got a good idea here. Don't get wobbly. Mean to snap him at the door with his back to the street? You're going to have to work fast. Because it mustn't be posed."

Elen fumbled with nervous fingers through her notebook, fluttering all the wrong leaves. "Oh, jumping crickets! Where *is* the thing?" she demanded, and then in answer to Larry's amused curiosity, she added under her breath, "Anne's picture! I wanted you to compare —— Oh—here ——"

Steve had reappeared with the camera, and Elen had just time to thrust the small picture into the hand ready to close over it.

"Anything more?" Steve was inquiring with exaggerated politeness. "Shall I

"Pluck with my thumbs
Seven silver plums
From off my golden apple tree?"

"Just go on up and stand in the doorway, please." There was the suggestion of a quaver in Elen's voice, and it was little wonder Steve regarded her suspiciously.

"'Just go up and stand in the doorway'?" He sounded aggrieved. "Is *that* all, after all this marvelous preparation? Don't you want me to stand on my left hand, or hold my chin in two fingers, the way celebrities do? I'm disappointed! Larry, are you coming to support me through this ordeal?"

Larry shook his red head violently. "I certainly am not! I'm directing this business."

"Hunh!" Steve surveyed them grimly. "I don't like this proceeding! I don't care about it at all. If anything explodes under me, I'll sue you both."

He turned toward the porch steps. Nervously the two watched him go. Watched him mount the steps two at a time. Saw him pause. "Now!" whispered Larry, and in the scant fraction of the second before Steve wheeled about, Elen had snapped the shutter.

She turned the roll and snapped it twice more while her cousin smirked at her.

Low in her ear Larry said: "You've got something! Steve's feet are together, Anne's are apart." Then as Steve sauntered toward them, he inquired, "So you've survived?"

"Apparently. Are you two idiots satisfied? If so, perhaps I'll have a chance to finish the remark I began ten minutes ago: Mr. and Mrs. John Springstead strolled in half an hour ago, and of course Mother prevailed upon them to stay for dinner—not that they required much prevailing! Come on in, Larry, and help Len entertain while Mother and I prepare to stretch the baked beans and jello!"

16

"Of All Places!"

For so long a time Anne Springstead had stood for the absent and unknown quantity in all of Elen's conjectures about the Herrick equations, that meeting an actual Anne so suddenly seemed the strangest and most unreal happening that Elen had ever experienced. Steve's news of Anne's arrival was like a bomb from a peaceful sky, and before the smoke had cleared from Elen's brain, Steve was propelling her chair into Uncle Billy's study. Numbed and befogged by excitement though she was, even in the moment Aunt Claire was introducing them to each other, Elen had an impression of a sparkling, impetuous young person. Anne's face was bright, her lips carmine, the fair hair, touched with a red sheen, was lifted from her head in a high swirl of roguish curls. There was the faintest and most tantalizing suggestion of perfume about her.

Anne acknowledged the introduction with a quick smile, said with prompt friendliness, " Another nice Herrick! " and without any noticeable change in the tempo of her story, went on to tell Aunt Claire of her sudden unbearable attack of homesickness, and how she and her husband had made a mad dash for the nearest airport to secure tickets for the first possible plane east!

Elen, feeling rather as though she had just finished a mad dash somewhere herself, sank back and willingly let Aunt Claire receive Anne's attention.

"—So I packed all my clothes in exactly twenty-five minutes!" Anne's high, eager voice was saying. "Don't you think that's a record of some sort, Aunt Claire? Those poor clothes must have had the surprise of their lives, the way they were scrambled together! I *think* I remember putting my bottle of that precious new orange perfume in the toe of one of my evening slippers, and I'm sure my special bracelet went into the other.—You haven't seen that, have you?—No, of course not! John only gave it to me last week for my birthday. But it *is* the *snookiest* thing you ever saw! Indian work, you know, all hammered silver and turquoises. Just wait till I unpack those slippers.—And you'll certainly grin when you hear where I put my bottle of pet nail-polish—I'll give you two guesses ——"

"I'll take one," Aunt Claire murmured gently. "Knowing you, I'd say you used your bathing suit."

Anne's blue eyes rounded in surprise. Then her lilting laughter broke out. "Why, that's exactly what I did do with it! But I didn't mean to put it there—I thought I'd stuck the mercurochrome in with my bathing suit, but I found *that* in with my nail-set yesterday morning, so the polish and the suit must be hobnobbing! And I *know* I gave John the shoe cream instead of his shaving cream ——"

At sight of Aunt Claire's twitching lips and Elen's dancing eyes, she stopped to giggle at herself. " Yes, I know it's funny! But when we decided to come home—we just *came.* One thing I *am* sorry about, and that is that I didn't find time to go over and kiss Stonewall Jackson good-bye. I did phone the groom at the stable to give him two extra lumps of sugar.—Did I write you about him? He was my last horse—I had three. Stodgy, but a nice old duck just the same.—Oh, and after our plane had started I was seized with the horrible idea that I'd left the electricity on after I'd finished using my curling iron. So John had to phone back. The resident manager of our apartment house never did have a very high opinion of me, and I'd hate to leave the impression that I was a firebug! That would have been a blot on the Springstead record, wouldn't it? "

" Rather a blister, I should say," Aunt Claire amended.

So this—this was Anne Springstead. Suddenly it was only too easy to understand how a silver bowl—or anything else—could slip from her care into oblivion. Piquant, vivid, fascinating, lovable, but somehow, for all her warm friendliness and her winsome ways, you missed the satisfying feeling of dependability which Claire Rodney Herrick and her children gave you.

Aunt Claire had risen to her feet, murmuring the dinner needed her attention. " No, Anne, there's nothing for you to do. Sit here and tell Len about California."

The flicker of humor in Mrs. Herrick's eyes as she passed Elen was almost the girl's undoing. Was Aunt Claire thinking that if Anne helped with the supper preparations they might find mayonnaise in their soup and the dessert garnished with pickles?

Long before the supper hour arrived Elen had reached the conclusion that Steve would have been far nearer the mark if he had asked her to come in and *be* entertained! All that was required of her was to give Anne her rapt and eager attention as the impetuous cascade of words tumbled on and on, and murmured agreement at appropriate intervals! Certainly it was no hardship to listen to Anne's blithe voice!

One thing Anne did possess, a talent for instant friendliness. Ten minutes after you met her you felt she had taken you into her confidence, and it would have required a flintier nature than Elen's not to have responded to her undeniable attraction!

Had Elen ever seen the mountain trails of California? Or the great Redwoods? Or sunset over the Pacific Ocean? When Elen was obliged to shake her head, Anne launched into such vivid little word sketches that Elen forgot her earlier inclination to laughter and listened enthralled. Under the spell of Anne's bird-clear voice and expressive gestures she almost saw California.

This was Anne Springstead too, this blithe, spirited young woman, eager to share her gay experiences, and with a faculty for finding exactly the right word. Yes, Elen realized Anne could be delightfully clever quite as easily as she could be happily careless. She was beginning to understand why the Herricks had such strong affection for her, and she had a suspicion that she herself was soon to be yielding to the charm Anne wielded. But, now that she had seen and listened to her, she had a sudden and grievous conviction that no one would ever obtain the clue to the bowl's whereabouts—not from Anne, at all events.

" Well, Ladybird ——"

So intent had both girls been on Anne's account of the misadventures their party had encountered on its last camping trip, that neither had heard a new visitor enter the room. They both jumped, and Elen looked up to see a youngish man who instantly reminded her of an intern at St. Luke's whom she had thoroughly despised. He was of a medium height, with a smug, polished look, a little bald, and his eyes held an aggravating half-smile.

" Covering all the high lights of our vacation? " He patted Anne's cheek playfully, and when Anne presented him to Elen as " John—my husband ——" he gave Elen the benefit of his ingratiating manner, and observed, " I can see now that the Herricks were quite justified in claiming you. If all invalids were so charming, I'd be tempted to adopt one myself! "

He had no way of knowing how longingly Elen eyed the brass paperweight on the nearby table, or why she suddenly sat on both hands. From the way she flushed John Springstead inferred he had made a good impression, and he laughed silkily as he turned back to Anne.

" Well, Ladybird, our house is an habitable place once more: water and electricity turned on. Under the circumstances,—with Sally being not quite well, I mean, I think it would be a kindness to the Herricks if we left for home directly after we have eaten."

His easy smile included Elen, but she did not return it. She hoped John Springstead would not linger on her horizon very long. He was much too bland, too sleek, too cool. So he and Anne would leave for home " directly after they had eaten "? And all out of consideration for the Herricks! Oh, of course!

" By the way," John was saying, " Steve walked over to the house with me. I asked him how things had worked out. Of course we knew the bowl hadn't been found, but do you know what that ridiculous boy told me? That, to make good the old lady's loss, he intends to sell the Rodney clock—in fact, his father has found a buyer for it. The man's coming out from the city next week—would have been here before, but he was called out of town on a business trip. Absurd, to think of a man with the brains your uncle is supposed to have, allowing a sacrifice like that! That's the Herrick medieval sense of honor."

So Steve was really going through with a sale! Elen hadn't known.

Never had Elen seen such a swift and piteous change in anyone's face as the one which seemed to strike all the animation and light from Anne. Her fingers went to her unsteady lips, and her voice was queer and frightened.

" Oh, John, he won't! Sell the Rodney clock? But—but it's *part* of us! "

" Just so! " Elen could have slapped him for his smug expression and suave tone. " Of course a boy like Steve couldn't be expected to value it properly."

Elen set her jaw with an audible click.

There was no sparkle or whimsicality in Anne now.

She looked at her husband beseechingly. " John, can't *we* buy it? " She reached up and shook his arm. " John, please—*please!* "

The vague dislike Elen had felt toward John Springstead settled into cordial and lasting distaste when he laughed soothingly.

" Sorry, Ladybird. But you should know me well enough to realize that when I write a check for two thousand dollars it must be for something more important than an old family clock! Just fix that in your mind, my dear."

To herself Elen murmured, " Yes, Japanese Beetle."

Anne's eyes were definitely clouded. " Someone should *stop* him! That clock—why, it was saved from the fire when the Rodney mansion burned. It was in that clock that the girls of the Rodney family hid their valuables during the War of 1812 ——"

Steve appeared to say that dinner was ready, and half-mechanically Anne was getting to her feet, with her unfinished sentence left to echo in Elen's ears for the next hour.

Taken unaware as she had been, Aunt Claire had still managed to assemble a meal which caused Anne to sigh rapturously, and gave John Springstead occasion to say with benign approval: " These extremely simple dishes just touch the spot, Aunt Claire! "

Looking at her delicately-browned omelette, fluffy and toothsome as ever emerged from a French chef's pan, her crisp and colorful salad, the feathery biscuits, and the freshly made angel cake, Mrs. Herrick may have had her own opinions as to the simplicity of the supper set before the Springsteads, but she merely said, demurely:

"You know the way to a woman's heart, John. I'm glad if these few little morsels please you!"

Anne seemed to have been choked into silence, and Elen might just as well have been eating sawdust. She realized that the room was gay with spring flowers, that the table was colorful and dainty. Aunt Claire, a little flushed and tired, was bestowing polite attention on John Springstead, and as his smooth, authoritative voice went on and on, both Uncle Billy and Steve were struggling not to show exactly how bored they were.

"I am fully convinced," John was declaiming with emphatic precision, "that California is *the* coming State in our nation! Progressive—bountiful—inspiring. Yes, the *coming* State!"

"Did you tell the Californians so?" Uncle Billy inquired with bland interest.

Deftly seizing the most golden biscuit on the plate, John nodded sagely. "Certainly! By all means! At every opportunity!"

A gleam of undeniable mirth lit up Mr. Herrick's eyes. "How the Californians must have appreciated it," he commented. "Most of them are so sure the State has arrived."

Once Elen really would have enjoyed that remark. Tonight it made only a meaningless sound in her ears. She had eyes only for the distraught Anne, and her mind had only one clear thought—

"It was in that clock that the girls of the Rodney

family hid their valuables during the War of 1812."

Had a modern Rodney girl done the same thing with a silver bowl this very year? If she had, did she know now what she had done, or was her distrait mood and the trouble in her eyes only due to the sudden shock of hearing that Steve actually intended selling the clock?

Several times Elen found her lips opening, and each time they closed again with the words unsaid. She simply could not blurt out: " Steve, I think Miss Page's bowl is hidden in your clock! " And yet—and yet—she had to do *something* while Anne was still there. In fairness to Steve, Anne must be on the scene when the thing was discovered—if there was to be a discovery.

Would the time never pass? Would the meal never end?

John Springstead was still proclaiming the wonders and glories of California as the family rose:

" Marvelous, I tell you. Magnificent! When you're married," he whirled upon Elen, " make your husband take you to California on your honeymoon—although, of course, there may not be a number of men like myself! "

In her heart Elen fervently hoped there were not! " I've always thought an Alaskan honeymoon would be nice," she observed pensively.

Uncle Billy, coming down with Sally's tray, brought the message that Sally was clamoring to see the Springsteads before they left. John looked judiciously doubtful: " Well, now, I don't know—I'm not at all sure that I want Anne —— These germs may still be lurking around Sally's room ——"

For the first time since Elen had seen them together, Anne sent her husband a withering look, and ran toward the stairs.

" Shall I tell Sally you think it prudent to stay below? " she inquired. " After all, she's been free of infection for ten days! "

Looking after him as he followed Anne, Elen decided that even the set of his shoulders could be irritating!

Then opportunity dropped into her hands. For a minute she and Steve were alone. She took a quick breath, gathered her wits and felt as though she was about to take a high dive into icy water.

" Steve ——" Her cousin was taking her back to her own sanctum, and time was ripe for the plunge if she was ever going to make it. " Steve—Mr.—Mr. Springstead told Anne and me that—that you really are selling the clock next week."

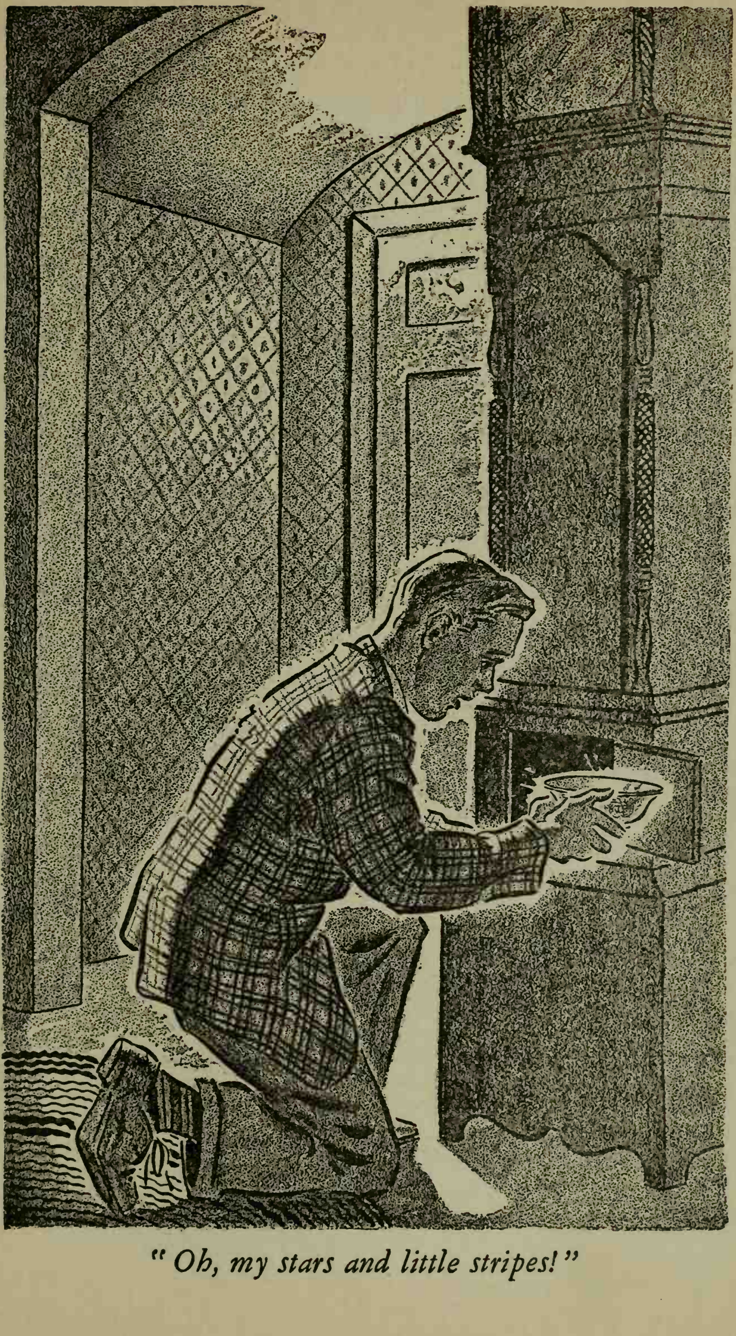
Steve grunted. He lowered his voice cautiously. " That man," he informed Elen grimly, " was born four hundred years too late! He'd have made a prize Inquisitor for the Spanish Inquisition. You never want to tell him things, but you do tell 'em just the same—at least I do."

" Then—then it's true? "

Steve nodded glumly. " Yes. Dad wrote several letters to people he thought might be interested. This man's coming out Wednesday."

Now—now was the time. Her fingers tightened. Her breath caught in her throat. Oh—she must—she *must* sound casual ——

" Do you know, Steve, I've never seen that secret place



" Oh, my stars and little stripes!"

in the clock? Since you're going to sell it—would it—would it be asking too much if I asked you to show it to me—*now?* "

There! It was done! Familiar objects began to waver unsteadily before her eyes as she waited for Steve's answer. Suppose he said, " Who told you there was a secret place? What do you know about it? " It wasn't easy to trick the alert Steve. Mercifully, he fell into the little trap, and while Elen held her breath, he said slowly, " Why—I suppose so—if you're interested in seeing it. After Anne and John—go home ——"

Did she dare press him further? Oh, she must! She *must!*

" Couldn't—could you do it—*now?* They're upstairs. Would it take so awfully long? I—I don't want to wait ——"

She never blamed him for the peculiar look he gave her, nor his short grunt of exasperation.

" Do you know you're exhibiting some funny symptoms today, Len? " he demanded. " You're turning into one of these ' But-I-want-what-I-want-when-I-want-it! ' people. You act as though the Government was in danger of collapsing if you didn't have it—pronto! All right. Here we go." He turned her chair back into the hall, down toward the clock. There he halted, dropped to one knee, and busied himself with the lower part of the clock—below the door. Suddenly a portion of the wood came away in his hands.

" This is it, Madam," he remarked in the tone of a demonstrator. " Family tradition says ——"

" Is—is there—anything—inside? "

" Naturally not —— *Oh, my stars and little stripes!* There is! It's—it's—it's ——" Then Stephen Herrick was stricken dumb.

He had drawn out a flannel-wrapped object, and, as the covering came away in his nerveless hands, he and Elen were staring at a bowl, discolored, but unmistakably impressive, and undeniably silver.

It was Elen's high, choked, wordless cry that brought an alarmed Aunt Claire and Uncle Billy into the hall and caused John Springstead to thrust a disapproving head over the stair railing.

" Elen—speak, dear! What happened? "

" If it's an accident, keep calm." This from John, who was discreetly remaining in the upper hall.

After one look at Steve, who was utterly beyond speech or action, Elen swallowed, and then cried in a shrill, strained voice completely unlike her own—" It isn't an acci—acci—it—oh, *don't* you see? Steve—Steve's just—*found* the bowl! It—it was hidden in the clock! "

" Of all the senseless places! " sputtered John Springstead. " You certainly must have put it there yourself, Steve! "

" But he didn't! " Anne pushed past him and was racing down the stairs. " He didn't! I remember now! *I* put it there myself! "

17

Story by Steve

SALLY propped her pointed chin in both hands and frowned at the rather unlovely object on the taboret before her couch. " So this," she observed with irony, " *this* is the bowl, is it? And it was this—this treasure which spoiled our winter, lost Steve his Kay-Bee job, and made Mr. Britten humiliate him before all the school? " She scrutinized the tarnished, forlorn-appearing bowl with her nose drawn up in utter distaste.

" It doesn't look important enough to make everybody so miserable, does it? " agreed Leslie, who had responded to an early morning telephone call from Elen.

" It looks afflicted with gangrene." Sally's voice was scornful. " That's how it looks to me! " She twisted impatiently on the couch. " Well, you're here, Leslie, and I'm downstairs, and there's the precious bowl. But where's Steve all this time? Did he go after Larry with a steam shovel? He'd have been back hours ago if he'd taken the car."

Considering the fact that it was a scant twenty minutes since Steve had borne his sister downstairs for the first time since her illness, deposited her carefully upon the couch, announced he was going to take the car over to Euclid Avenue and fetch Larry, because for some reason Elen thought he might have a few interesting side lights of his own to throw upon the bowl affair, Sally's aspersions on the Herricks' faithful Pontiac were rather undeserved.

"But, Steve"—Sally had protested as he laid the gay afghan over her—"that's not a bit fair! I'm your sister! I deserve to know first! How did that thing get into the clock ——"

Steve gave her an aggravatingly bland smile as he shrugged into his coat. "Why, you know! Anne put it there. Now be a patient little girl until brother comes back with Larry, and then he'll divulge the whole marvelous story. You can admire the bowl while I'm gone."

Elen had giggled at Sally's disgusted grimace. Leslie, who had come in a bare ten minutes before, asked in surprise: "Don't *you* know what happened last night?"

No, Sally didn't. For very good and sufficient reasons. After Elen had alarmed the entire house with her screech, there had been borne to Sally's straining ears some stray words about the bowl. Then had come Anne's scream, and Sally decided it was time to join the family. She had leaped out of bed—and, as she explained ruefully to Leslie, "the evening promptly ended in a blackout for Sally, with everything happening downstairs. To think that I had to miss the climax of the whole affair. Disgusting!"

"Well, maybe you missed out on it personally, but you certainly contrived to add some extra excitement on your own count," Elen informed her. "Aunt Claire heard you fall, and then ——"

Sally made another face. "Yes, wasn't that a contribution to the celebration? I never fainted before—I didn't even know I knew how! Really, I didn't understand what it was about when I woke up and found Mother and Allan fussing over me. I was so embarrassed —— Oh," she beat her hands together in a characteristic gesture of impatience, "why *don't* they come?"

From her vantage point at the window, Elen, three minutes before, had caught a glimpse of a familiar blue car flash up the driveway. Now, as two heads, one blond and curly, the other red, looked around the door, she grinned involuntarily.

"I wonder why, too," meditated a soft voice. At the sound of which both Leslie and Sally jumped.

"Stephen Herrick," Sally cried reproachfully, "if you think this suspense is good for me—come on in and begin!"

Larry looked distinctly baffled, and Steve gave him a little push. "Go on in, Larry. Perhaps you can appease the lady. I've always heard convalescents were temperamental. Now I know they are."

Larry's blithe grin included Elen and Leslie. Then he looked toward Sally. "Well, making the acquaintance of the bug that bit us both certainly was sufficient to make anyone temp ——" He broke off, his jaw sagging, eyes startled as his gaze came to rest on the object adorning the taboret. "Hey—what the ——" He put his hand to his head, and began again. "What under the canopy ——"

" Oh—that? " Steve waved his hand airily. " Why, just a little thing we found around the house last night. Pretty, don't you think? "

" No, I don't! " said Larry positively. He stood staring, dazed and unbelieving. " No kidding, is it really ——"

Steve nodded in confirmation. " Genuine Revere piece. You see before you two thousand dollars' worth of beauty."

" I'll take your word for it, but I—something must be wrong with my eyes if *that's* beauty. Could I —— Ah—well, *feeling* might be believing! "

" Sure! Pick it up! " invited Steve. " You can't wreck it! "

Larry advanced to the taboret, frowned at the bowl and then lifted it and turned it rather gingerly. Certainly it didn't look like a chalice for so much trouble. Perhaps eight inches in circumference, it had been fashioned in a severely plain design, without ornament, except for a conventional semicircle of rose leaves, surmounted by a single full-blown rose. In the enclosure, in old English script, the initials " C. P." stood out boldly.

Larry turned the bowl slowly, shook his head bewilderedly, set it down, and said, even as Sally had said before him, " So this is it! " He took a long breath. " When you insisted that I must come over at once and see the marvelous thing which had befallen the Herricks, I thought Anne must have brought you a baby panda at the very least. But—hey! " New light suddenly dawned in Larry's brain. " You said you found it around the house? Then you—you *did* have it all the time? " His face slowly took on a look of blank incredulity, and Steve, thoroughly enjoying himself, smiled and nodded affably.

"Yep! I did. Didn't know it, but Anne certainly was right. She had given it back to me."

Leslie viewed him with doubt mingling with dismay. "How could you, Steve? How could she have given it back to you, and you not know it?"

"She probably put it under his hat," suggested Larry brightly. "Old Steve doesn't wear a hat except perhaps three times a year!"

An anguished groan from the direction of the couch made them aware of Sally. She was making frantic gestures of despair. "Steve, if you really *are* going to tell how and where and why, do get going!"

Steve smiled at her gently. "I'm not exactly in the habit of interrupting my guests," he observed. "Have patience, little one. When everyone subsides ——" He reached up, caught Larry by the coat collar and dragged him down to the window seat. "Well, now,—well now, if everybody is at attention ——" He looked from Elen to Leslie seated on the piano bench, and then his eyes rested on his sister's thin face, with its two spots of feverish excitement. "I really wonder —— Sally, are you sure you're strong enough to hear this today?"

Sally and Stephen had once visited a stern old great-uncle, lawyer Robert Herrick, an assertive, domineering man, who was possessed of a formidable frown which intimidated his family, neighbors, clients and foes alike—everyone in short except the small Sally. Far from being frightened, she had been delighted, and after much practice had caught the trick of giving " the Herrick look " herself. Now she bestowed it upon Steve in full measure.

Steve chuckled, glanced brightly around the room at his audience, took an aggravatingly long time to fit the finger tips of his left hand against the fingers of his right, and then inquired pleasantly:

" So you would like to hear about our little episode of last evening? Well, now—well, now, if you're really interested ——"

" I'm not sure that I am—now." Larry's tone was bored.

" Too bad. Too bad. Because you're going to hear about it just the same. Where shall we begin, Len? Where you insisted on seeing the hiding place in the clock ——? "

" Hiding place in the clock? " Leslie forgot her manners and was guilty of interrupting. " You mean your big clock? I didn't know it had one."

Steve nodded. " It has. I'll show it to you afterward. I hadn't thought about it for a year or two. Never would, I guess, but Len wouldn't rest until she saw it last night. ' I want to see it *now!* ' she said, and she meant *now.* I thought she was wacky, and I've always heard it's the best policy to humor such people, so I opened the concealed door in the clock. Len asked if there was anything in it, and I ——"

" You said," Elen interposed, " ' Naturally not! ' in a tone of immense disgust. And ' Why, my stars and little stripes, there *is!* ' Then you went dumb for the rest of the evening."

"Anything I might have said would have been an anticlimax after your war whoop," Steve countered. "You told the glad news all right. Didn't you hear the echoes over on Euclid Avenue, Larry? I know Leslie didn't escape."

"That was positively the wildest screech I ever hope to hear," meditated Sally. "Honestly, Elen, you made John's hair stand on end."

Elen grinned, decidedly pleased. To have shaken John Springstead out of his usual satisfied, assured self was a real achievement.

"Everything seemed to happen at once after Len sent in the alarm," continued Steve. "Everybody jammed into the hall, with Anne tearing down the stairs, yelling that *she* had put the bowl in the clock herself. She began to cry, and John was clamoring: 'Put in a call for the police! That's my advice! Turn the thing over to the police at once!' And Len—I'm not too sure what it was Len was doing, but it sounded pretty ghoulish, whatever it was."

At Steve's mention of the hideous fit of laughter which had gripped her for a few minutes last night, Elen shuddered. It had been a horrible feeling, to half-laugh, half-cry, gurgle and choke all at the same time, growing weak and bitterly ashamed, but utterly helpless to stop herself.

"What were you doing all that time?" Larry inquired interestedly. Steve shook his head, and his face held a genuinely perplexed expression.

"Honestly, I don't know what happened to me. Remember hearing that doctor lecture on this new drug they use for some operations? The one which leaves you numb, but able to understand everything that's going on? Well, I know the sensation. I stood there, holding that bowl, and knowing everything it meant: That Miss Page would have her property back—that we'd keep the clock—that no one could ever smile knowingly when they looked at me, not ever again. I knew I should be excited,—everybody else was, but I'd just stopped feeling."

"He was the only quiet person there," corroborated Elen. "There he stood, looking at that bowl with the mildest kind of interest. Only the muscle in his right cheek moved—you know the way it does ——"

Steve lifted his hand hurriedly to his cheek, and gave his cousin a perplexed frown. Leslie nodded in swift understanding, and Larry laughed. "Sure we know! And when that muscle does its stuff, watch out! Something's seething inside old Steve!"

Steve folded his arms, and looked benignly at the group. "Steve's learning things about himself. Most interesting. Proceed."

But Sally had other ideas. "No, don't! I came downstairs to hear about the bowl, not about Steve's muscles."

Larry waved his hand. "Oblige the lady, by all means."

"Well," Steve took up his story once more, "Dad called Mr. Kennedy,—the lawyer for Miss Page, you know. He said he'd come over as soon as he could stop and call for his secretary ——"

"You don't mean you didn't call the police?" Larry sounded truly astounded. "How could your father pass up John's sage advice?"

" Why his secretary? " This from Sally.

Steve surveyed them coldly. " There have been too many interruptions in this narrative. I do not care for them. Leslie and the canary are the only people in this room with manners. When you are ready to listen politely ——"

Supreme silence reigned in the sunlit room. Sally cupped her chin with both hands and assumed a demure expression. Across Larry's face came a look of complete fascination. His lips were parted a little as he stared at Steve in eager anticipation. Elen sat with one finger upon her lips. Enjoying their rapt attention, Steve cleared his throat with a satisfied sound. Just at that moment Pitti Sing broke into a cascade of liquid notes, and Leslie, of all people, giggled. Larry rolled anguished eyes at her, and shook his finger warningly at the canary.

" I will excuse the bird," said Steve magnificently. " Well, now, let's see—where was I? "

Nobody dared tell him!

" Ah, yes. Dad had sent for Mr. Kennedy and his secretary. Before that we'd discovered that Sally had been inconsiderate enough to faint, but that wasn't of much importance, so we'll skip it ——"

Sally thanked him with a glare.

" Dad had us all go into the library and sit down. ' Try to relax,' he advised us. Nobody seemed to do it—except me. Anne was demanding over and over: ' *Why* don't you *say* something, Steve? Steve, why don't you talk? '

" Finally—Dad said they did it in half an hour, but I think it was more like two centuries—Mr. Kennedy and the secretary arrived. Mr. Kennedy was awfully nice;

always has been to us. If it had been someone from his own family suspected of—of—stealing the bowl, he couldn't have acted gladder it had come to light. Then Dad asked Anne to tell Mr. Kennedy as much of the business as she could remember—how and why and when she hid the bowl in the clock, and the secretary would take it down in shorthand, and attest it as a Notary Public. Poor kid, Anne was scared sick." Steve stopped and bit his lip. "I was sorry Dad thought it was necessary to insist on that part of it. She looked so—so helpless, and she hadn't done anything wrong, not really. Of course John began to bluster, but Dad said he wanted the story down in black and white for Miss Page to read. So"—he drew a long breath—"so—here's what she told us:

"She remembers that after I left she took the bowl and put it in the top of the refrigerator, just as she told you she was going to do, Leslie; but after you'd gone, and Mr. Britten left, she thought she saw someone prowling around the house, and she began to worry. She and John were going to the Society Circus that night,—in fact, she was to be the ringmaster. And she was plain scared to leave such a valuable thing in the house. Anyway she was afraid the prowler might have heard her tell Leslie where she planned to hide it. She doesn't recall thinking of the old family story about the girls hiding their valuables in the clock during the War of 1812.—Oh, yes," he nodded at the puzzled expressions both Leslie and Larry were wearing, "there *is* a family tradition that some Rodney girls did that, and it really must have been in Anne's subconscious mind, at least, because that's exactly what she did.—When she was dressed in her riding habit for the rôle of ringmaster at the Society Circus, she grabbed up the bowl and ran over here. She had a key to the house, and the rest was simple. She didn't even tell John for some reason, and of course they never reached the circus. The accident happened when they were on the way, you know. All she could remember about it was that she'd given it back to me. I suppose that's because the clock's mine." Steve made a curious little gesture and smiled wryly. " Well, that was all. That's the explanation of how a bowl could vanish from sight, and still be under my nose every single day. Now there's one piece of information you can give me, Len; I haven't had a chance to ask you before, but why did you wait until last night to ask me to open that compartment? If you'd only been inspired to be curious about it sooner——"

Elen grinned. " Because I didn't know there *was* such a thing until Anne blurted it out yesterday when John told her you were going to sell the clock! "

" I can see we were idiots not to think of that place in the clock before," remarked Sally sadly. " I suppose we've always taken the clock too much for granted! "

Leslie was leaning forward, understanding in her eyes, excitement making her usually pale face vivid, her voice eager and hurried as Elen had heard it only once before—the day after the audition.

" Then I really *did* see someone here—only it was Anne, dressed for the circus! Oh, Steve, I never did think you'd *stolen* that bowl, but I was sure that for some reason you'd come back home that night! I've always been sorry

I talked about it, and now I'm terribly ashamed,—it—it caused you so much trouble—and I was so terribly wrong ——"

"You and me both," Larry admitted huskily. "I had absolute proof that Steve had been home that night. Positive uncontradictable proof!"

Dumbfounded Steve stared at him. "Hey, what *is* this?"

"I certainly did, didn't I, Len?" When Elen nodded, he looked back into Steve's questioning eyes. "You see, for a joke, I took a picture of you as you stood at the door—at least I thought it was your picture. Of course it was actually Anne's. No, you never saw it, and you never will. I destroyed it when I was sick. But I'd showed it to Len, and she insisted it wasn't you at all. Couldn't give me a good reason. It just *wasn't.* I think now it was the differance in the way you and Anne stand. Then Anne sent the snap showing her in her riding habit, and Len was convinced. But, as I said, I'd destroyed the print and the negative, so we couldn't compare the pictures. Did that bother Len? Well, remember how she insisted on taking your picture outside the front door yesterday?"

Light broke upon Steve. "So that accounts for your peculiar behavior yesterday, Len! But—wait a minute! You mean—you thought I had deliberately lied when I kept insisting I hadn't been home that night?"

His face went white. His eyes were suddenly angry. Larry gave him one look, and then, taking him by the shoulders, shook him fiercely. "For Pete's sake, Stephen Herrick, don't look like that! What *could* I think? What could Leslie think? Remember, we'd seen you here—in your Kay-Bee uniform. I never thought you had the bowl. I knew you couldn't have it. Anne was always the guilty person in my mind! Oh, Steve, won't you see how it was? "

Steve's eyes were turned away. He had no answer. Again it was very still in the room, while Steve watched the sunspots dance from Washington's strong bronze profile at one end of Elen's favorite row of books to Lincoln's kindly one at the other. If Larry was right about the little muscle, something certainly was creating a struggle within Steve, for the ripple was very much in evidence. Elen held her breath. Suppose Steve shouldn't see how strong Larry's friendship really had been? Then, with his eyes still averted, Steve spoke:

" You and Leslie had all the evidence that I really must have been doing something phoney that night, and trying to conceal it, and yet you didn't believe I had the bowl? That's—that's—well, thanks! "

" What I want to know is, why the hoodooed thing is still here? " demanded Sally. " Why didn't Mr. Kennedy take possession of it last night? "

" I've been wondering when you'd think of that," her brother commented. " It's because Mr. Kennedy wanted to have a photograph made of it in exactly the place where we found it. He's going to bring a photographer here this morning. Rather than carry it back and forth, he asked Dad to keep it another night."

" When you look at it now, Steve, how does it make you feel? " asked Larry.

" Well," Steve said it slowly, but his eyes had begun to hold mischievous lights, " I begin to feel as if I'd like to throw the darn bowl at Paul Revere's head! "

It was Leslie who made the inquiry which had been stirring in Elen's mind: " Suppose the sale of the clock had really gone through? "

Steve said one word: " Don't! "

An hour later Mr. Kennedy, his photographer friend and the special camera had all come and gone. With them went the silver bowl. Once more Mr. Kennedy had wrung Stephen Herrick's hand, and wrung it hard.

" There's no gainsaying this piece of silver's given you hard times, laddie," he declared earnestly. " But I'm thinking you'll have no need to regret them. One of two things would happen to a boy who went through that kind of experience: He'd emerge a sniveling, broken-spirited being or a splendid man. . . . And I've heard no sniveling out of you! "

18

Elen Tastes of Despair

A MONTH later, on the last day of June, Sally brought the wheel chair to a smooth stop under the protection of the twin white birches. " Here you are. Directly below the tanager apartment. Sure you've got everything you think you might want—notebook—field glasses—the camera? " Was it the uncomfortable over-sensitiveness which Elen's ears and nerves had recently developed which gave Sally's voice a perfunctory shade? At any rate it was best merely to nod in reply—speaking might too easily betray the tightness of her throat.

Sally moved on tiptoe toward the birches, stretching herself up in order to get a glimpse of the tanager's nest. " Let's hope you do see these children fly this afternoon—it will be your last chance.—Oh, by the way, when Steve goes downtown do you want him to get you another roll or two of film? Once a person begins taking pictures at Pakawake they can't stop themselves, and you're such an insatiable camera fiend ——"

Elen smiled stiffly. " One roll," she compromised, although she knew she wouldn't need it. Sally was forgetting that no matter how many tempting places Pakawake might hold for the average photographer, they would all be utterly beyond Elen's reach.

" One." Sally bent down a finger, apparently to impress the item upon her memory. " All right. Well, it's perfectly gorgeous here, but this doesn't help Mummie pack." She turned resolutely toward the house, and then whirled back. " By the way, what shoes do you want to take, Len? All the white ones, of course, and the tan-and-white sport ones, and the dress-up blue ones ——? " She paused meditatively. " Yes, I think so. What about your tennis shoes? "

Tennis! Would her throat ever stop hurting when someone mentioned anything so active as tennis or horseback riding?

Perhaps Sally heard her cousin's quick-drawn breath, or perhaps Elen wasn't quite successful in her desperate attempt to keep her feelings from her face, for the color was suddenly surging in Sally's own cheeks, and her voice was hurried and uneven.

" You'd better—take them. Tennis shoes are so cool. Do you ——" She was making a bright effort to be quizzical. " Do you want me to stick your tooth paste in the toe of the one and your rose quartz necklace in the other? Oh, Len, *do* you realize that we *are* packing our belongings to go to Pakawake for the summer? Actually? Think of it! "

Elen had been thinking of it, she reflected grimly. Fortunately Sally wasn't interested in any answer from Elen. In sheer ecstasy she was holding her hands high above her head until her finger tips touched, and was executing a series of beautiful and incredibly swift pirouettes on the edge of the garden until she was dizzy and exhausted. Then, having stood still long enough to regain her breath and her balance, she gave Elen a vehement hug and was darting back to the house.

Elen looked after her wistfully. It would be beautiful to whirl like that. Perhaps—perhaps she would never know the feeling again. As for Pakawake—ever since Uncle Billy had told his family that they could count on opening up the Pakawake cabin the first of July, Sally had been living in a state of fervid joy. Tommy and Steve had received the news with distinct approval, but Sally really seemed beyond commonplace gladness. She was touched with rapture. But for Elen the thought of going to Lake Pakawake brought on a sickening tide of dread and discouragement.

Pakawake was loveliness itself, a real enchanted place. But—the way to the cabin was up a steep and long flight of stone steps. The beach road was stony and uneven. Here, in Meredith, everything seemed made for her convenience. She had been able to journey out of the house and through the garden, and, within the past month, to go on increasingly long automobile trips; she had had the illusion of freedom. At Pakawake she would be a prisoner.

She knew the spell the place had for those who loved mountains and woods and water. She didn't begrudge the Herricks going. Last year she had given her heart to Pakawake herself. But that was when she was lithe, and fleet of foot. This year she would be barred from following the mountain trails, either afoot or on horseback; she would glimpse the woods from the cabin, but she couldn't step softly through them to learn their mysteries; the beach, even, would be impossible unless she was carried. And if she were—there would be no happiness in watching the tantalizing lake!

Probably everybody would be kind and neighborly—but it wasn't just kindness or pity she wanted; it was something—something for which she had no words.

Nor could she expect the other young people there to take much time out from their tennis and swimming and horseback riding to be nice to her. After all they came to Pakawake to be active, and it wouldn't be fair ——

The garden before her was suddenly an indefinite mass of blurred color. Her eyelids stung. Despair had made an insidious attack, and despair makes a mean enemy.

"I mustn't! I *mustn't!*" choked Elen forlornly. "If I began to howl now I wouldn't be able to stop for a week!"

She crushed her tight fists against her lips and fought back the rising tide of sobs by sheer will, until the garden was clear again, and only the hot band of pain about her throat remained.

Once she had thought that if she could bring the silver bowl to light and clear Steve's name, she would be satisfied. The bowl had been found and Steve's innocence established with triumph. The fact didn't seem to mean anything to her today.

In the days when Sally had lain desperately ill, her recovery was the one thing which counted in Elen's life. Today Sally was her old sound, vigorous self. But ——

Elen wanted something more.

Would she ever get it?

Six weeks before she had been so sure. That was the day when she had first stood upon her feet. Allan had been sure, too, and Aunt Claire. Her period of helplessness was certainly past. In a month she was to have been going gaily about on her own feet. Something unforeseen had slipped in to complicate the matter, and a few shuffling steps were still all she could achieve.

Allan had taken her back to St. Luke's for a check-up. The results of the exhaustive examination had held little satisfaction for Elen. The surgeons had one and all agreed that her knee had responded amazingly well to treatment. It was, to all intents and purposes, completely healed, and sometime soon some outside stimulus would set it in action. As for her back—we-ll, that was something else again. There was a misplaced vertebra which hadn't yielded to treatment. The doctors were inclined to shrug their shoulders about that. It wouldn't interfere with Elen's ability to walk, but it was bound to be a handicap until set right.

Allan had been very frank with her about the doctors' opinions.

" Dr. Arrowby suggests an operation, but I've a hunch that the thing can be brought back into position by other methods! Are you game to let me try to prove it? Say for about four months? There's always a good chance I may be wrong. But one thing's sure: That vertebra isn't keeping you from walking. That's simply because your knee has gone to sleep and doesn't know it's time to wake up! "

Elen had smiled at him faintly. She wasn't smiling today. She was suddenly very weary of being helpless, and she had a dragging suspicion that the Herricks were, too. They had been so nice, so casual, with never a trace of pity, but ——

When all was said and done she *was* an invalid, and she must be, as Aunt Serena had said on that awful night so many months ago, a burden!

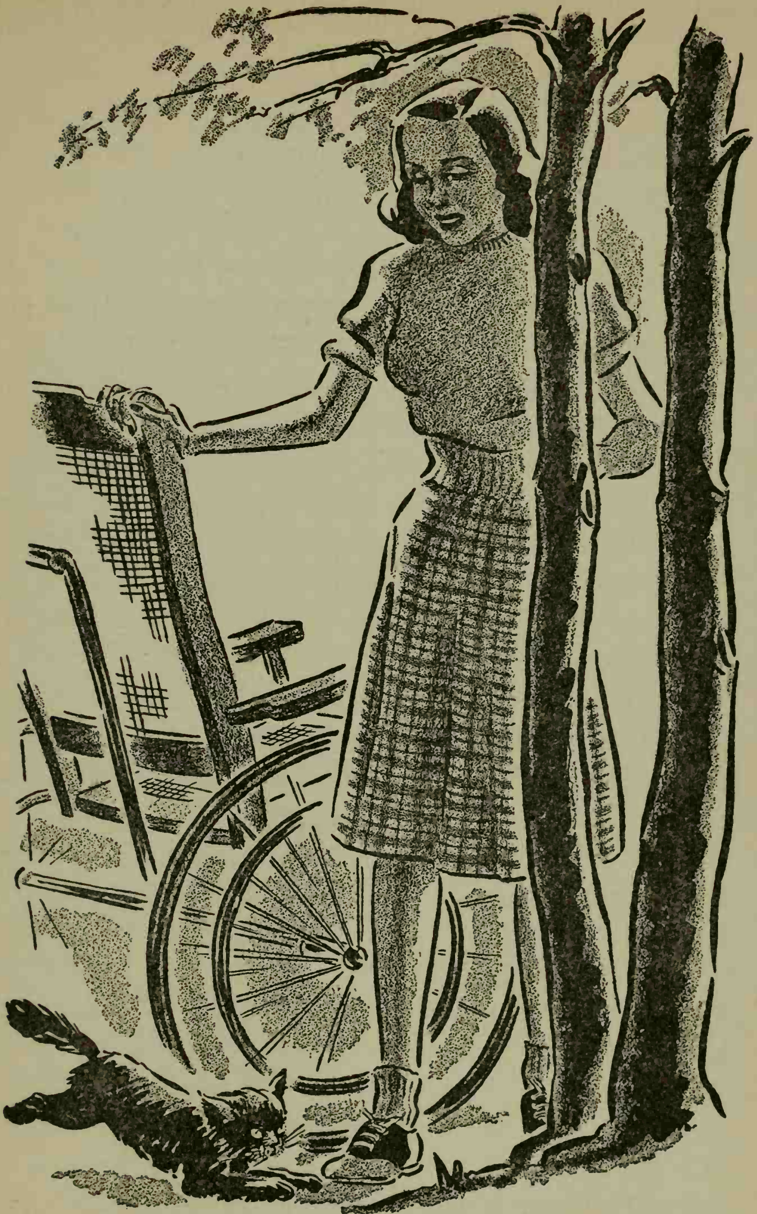
Instinctively Elen clenched her hands. Aunt Serena had been right about it, even though she had exerted all her will to keep from being petulant, troublesome.

Still she was an invalid, and her presence in the family must have been a brake on Sally's good times. Of all the girls Elen had ever seen, Sally was the most buoyant, volatile, charming. She always looked as though her mind and body were both poised for instant flight.

The warm little wind, fragrant from having blown over the garden, touched her cheeks gently. The exquisite Madonna lilies inclined their heads toward her; a bird spiraled toward the sky. Elen was aware of them all, but nothing counted with her now except the forlorn weight of her helplessness and her increasing dread of going to Pakawake.

If only Sally wouldn't talk quite so much about Pakawake! It was her one topic of conversation. When she had been drawing the water for Elen's bath that morning she had cried: "Tomorrow, Len—tomorrow—we'll be hearing the Minute Waltz outside your window at the cabin!"

The "Minute Waltz," named by Steve, was the tiny



Elen took an uncertain and desperate step forward.

waterfall in the small brook which ran just beside the Herrick cabin.

All morning as she went about her work, Sally had been humming, " Tomorrow—Pakawake! Tomorrow! Tomorrow! Tomorrow! Tomorrow! "

On the way down to the garden, Sally had gestured toward the azure sky with its exquisitely filmy clouds, and commented: " Tomorrow we'll be seeing Twin Peaks with their heads in the clouds! "

Yes, tomorrow. Tomorrow she would be away from this friendly garden, and its half-tame bird habitués ——

She had held herself tight for so long that she no longer was tempted to cry. Only she seemed in a queer lethargy.

Something half fluttered, half flopped to the ground some distance away without Elen being conscious of the motion. Then came a flash of vivid wings, and Elen lifted her tired eyes. One of the tanager babies must have flown. She located him after a second, a small, ruffled-up blob of greenish feathers and wide mouth, bewilderingly unlike his sleek, brilliant father who was hovering anxiously about. This was the finest opportunity for a parent-and-child bird photograph Elen might ever have, but she was too utterly dispirited even to reach for her camera. Father Tanager flew away, baby squawked and flapped his wings ineffectively, and Elen had a fellow feeling of sympathy for him. Then, from the tail of her eye she had the impression that something black was moving across the lawn. There was! Black Sheba the kitten, now well on the way to being an active young cat. She hadn't caught sight of the tempting morsel on the ground as yet—she was moving much too slowly to have seen it, but when she did ——

To have one of the baby tanagers she had been watching for days eaten before her eyes! It was hideous! It couldn't happen—and yet it would. Elen watched in horrified fascination while Sheba paced steadily forward. Then ——

She put her hands on the chair arms and exerted all her strength and will to lift herself up. Once on her unsteady feet she clung waveringly to the back of the chair, her eyes on Sheba. Her eye caught either by the flutterings of the baby bird or by Elen, Sheba was beginning to run. Elen drew a desperate breath, let go the chair and took an uncertain and desperate step forward.

Sometimes in stories she had read of people who broke the spell of their helplessness in response to some emergency, and always according to the author, " He never knew how he managed to take the necessary steps." Elen was acutely aware of the rebellion of her muscles and the unsteadiness of her steps. Just as Sheba would have glided past her, Elen bent and gathered her up. Perhaps her nervous fingers clutched her too tightly, at any rate the indignant squirming on poor Sheba's part upset Elen's precarious balance and she sat down abruptly and ignominiously. When her breath returned, she glanced backward at her chair. She could certainly crawl back to it, but suddenly she knew she never would.

Foiled of her prey, and having seen the baby tanager take awkwardly to its wings for a safer spot, Sheba settled herself comfortably on Elen's shoulder. Elen took a long breath, tried to stop the shivering which had suddenly taken possession of her, and began to talk into a furry ear.

" You know, Sheba, I'm going to try it. I—I really believe I can ——"

Regaining her feet wasn't easy. Elen sank back more than once, bit her lip, almost gave up. Finally she was up, and had gathered Sheba in her arms. One step—two—another and still another. She went slowly, but she *was* moving. Her knee was in working order once more!

" Sheba," said Elen scarcely above a whisper, " Sheba, suppose we go up to the house and call on the family? "

Cats truly are understanding creatures. Sheba gazed at Elen fixedly for a moment, then blinked gravely and purred her approval.

The reach of lawn from garden to house was longer than Elen had anticipated, but she traveled it somehow. A little breathlessly she pushed open the door which opened into her own particular room. Absorbed in sorting and packing Elen's own belongings, neither Aunt Claire, busily placing clothing in a suitcase, nor Sally, who had her head in the closet, heard her. For a minute Elen leaned against the door to steady her trembling self, and then opened her lips for a gay call. It was surprising when no sound came. Her mouth was suddenly dry. She tried again, and instead of the nonchalant greeting she had intended, a very thin, cracked little voice said:

" H-hello! It's me! You—know, I—I think my knee's—waked up! "

As both Aunt Claire and Sally whirled about, much to her everlasting chagrin, Elen Herrick burst into tears.

19

Starring Sally in a Plot

ALL Elen's pent-up horror of helplessness, her consuming fear of being a drag upon the Herrick family and her aching longing for freedom, went out in that storm of tears. It lasted so long that Aunt Claire grew alarmed, and Sally was moved to speak with irritation:

" Great day, Len, if you keep this up, you'll have the house flooded! "

Neither Sally's sharpness nor Aunt Claire's soothing touch even lessened the shuddering sobs or the burst of tears. Elen cried until she lay exhausted and ashamed. By that time Mrs. Herrick had wisely taken the indignant Sally with her from the room, leaving Elen to slowly get control of herself, and recover from her shame. When Uncle Billy called her to dinner she emerged with pale cheeks and pitifully swollen lids, but seemingly calm enough. She proved that her walk up from the garden was no fluke by walking unassisted to her place at the dinner table, but when the round-eyed Tommy, unmindful of the warning shake of his mother's head, cried out excitedly, " Gee, Len! You really can, can't you? I thought it was one of Steve's fish-stories, about your walking. How did you know you could, huh? How'd you know?" the uncontrollable tears began again. She was too weak for a repetition of the first wild attack, but she simply couldn't stop. For the time being all her determination and courage were completely gone. Aunt Claire led her from the table, undressed her gently and put her to bed, all without saying a word. The first voice which penetrated her rather foggy consciousness was Allan's, who had been summoned by a perturbed Uncle Billy.

"Weep, Niobe, weep," he advised her. "Here's a nice lot of fresh handkerchiefs."

Elen's fingers groped for and found a comfortingly large-sized linen square.

"I—I don't k-know w-w-why I'm c-cry-ing!" she gulped. "S-something just b-b-broke loose inside me. W-won't y-you s-ss-stop it, please?"

"Nope!" said Allan matter-of-factly. "I won't. You just cry until you're run down. If you don't, you'll only have to begin again. Now just you go ahead and weep to your heart's content."

Elen took a fresh grip on the handkerchief, and took Allan at his word. Allan went out and shut the door behind him.

"Won't hurt her," he remarked to the anxious Herricks. "She'll be asleep inside twenty minutes. Keep her in bed tomorrow morning. By the way, do you know what really gave her the impetus to walk?"

Between them, Sally and her mother pieced together the disjointed story which Elen had managed to sob out.

Allan nodded gravely. "Um, yes, I'm glad it worked out before you left for Pakawake. Your strategy probably wasn't wasted effort, either, Sally."

Sally, her mouth strained and miserable, shrugged one shoulder. "You needn't start congratulating me! I feel like the miserablest worm that ever crawled. Oh, Allan, she'll—she'll be all right? You're awfully sure?"

Allan grinned, but his eyes were understanding. He nodded, and Claire and Billy Herrick relaxed. Sally's eyes were still dubious. She glanced at the closed door. The sound of the sobbing breath had subsided.

"It—it was so queer. I'd never heard her cry ——"

"Plucky girl," Allan commented. "She could be all twisted and taut and frightened inside, and never let you see. When everything was all right, the dam simply had to break! By tomorrow afternoon she'll have regained her balance."

The combination of warm sunlight in her eyes and Pitti Sing's high song in her ears woke Elen the next morning. She stretched her arms above her head languidly, tired, but no longer tearful. A delicate sense of joy and well-being began to creep through her. She was still ashamed at the memory of yesterday's performance, but the feeling of confidence was counterbalancing her humiliation. She could grin at Aunt Claire who made her appearance in the doorway.

"Good morning. I hope the foundations of the house weren't weakened by last night's floods?" she asked solicitously.

Aunt Claire laughed. "Everything's intact, I think.

You're to stay in bed until we're ready to start for Pakawake, young lady. Allan's orders. No, you needn't grimace. Steve's going to make you his French toast special. Yes, you can sit up! I've no desire to feed you every mouthful!"

Elen, to whom breakfast in bed was the lowest state of wretchedness, would have rebelled, but, as she had reason to know, Allan had a disconcerting habit of wandering in and observing whether his dictates were being obeyed! Even the prospect of a morning in bed couldn't dismay her. The feeling of delicious joy and restored power was too strong.

It really was Sally who bore her breakfast tray, adorned with one half-opened red rose and with the golden toast surrounded by luscious red berries.

"Is it *you?"* Elen fell back against her pillows and let her voice register bewildered astonishment. "Why, I thought you would be in the hall, with one hand on your suitcase and the other on the doorknob, and both eyes glued on the clock waiting for the minute to arrive when we start for Pakawake!—When do we, incidentally?"

Sally's grin was rather lopsided. "Oh, about two o'clock, if Allan gives you his official permission to go."

"His official permission—well, he'd better!"

Sally was rearranging the objects on the mantel with nervous fingers. After she had nearly dropped Elen's pet candlestick, Elen glanced at her curiously. When she absent-mindedly tipped half the water from a vase of flowers over her fresh blouse, Elen was a little frightened. Was there something that Sally was supposed to tell her and didn't know how? Did Allan intend taking her back to St. Luke's for a new check-up?—Or had something happened to Uncle Mark in Tibet?

"Sally!" her voice sounded sharp. "What's the matter? Has something happened that I don't know? You're acting terribly queer!"

Sally set the vase down with nervous fingers. "A-am I?" she laughed uncertainly. "Something happened all right.—Oh"—as she saw her cousin's face—"don't be frightened, Len. It was a nice something, but—but I'm not so awfully proud of *my* part in it, that's all." She came over and dropped to the window seat opposite the bed. "I've got a confession to make, and—and—I'm not good at confessing!"

Elen stared at her in bewilderment, while Sally toyed with the shade-pull, gulped, and then plunged in:

"Len, you remember all the doctors at the hospital said your knee was healed, even though it wouldn't work? And you'd go on like that—just shuffling around a few steps at a time until you had some 'outside stimulus' to compel you to make the effort to walk?"

Elen nodded, feeling completely baffled.

"So Allan hatched a plot, and—and he made me the villain of it!" This was hard going for Sally. She choked, half with laughter, half with tears. "He said you were too content with things as they were, and everything was too convenient for you here. If we took you to Pakawake, unless you were willing to stay more or less in one spot, you'd *have* to make a special exertion. But he did more—oh, Allan does a thing brown when he does it! He mapped out an advance campaign, and as I said before, *I* played the villain of the piece! Oh, Len, don't you remember how I gloated on the glories of Pakawake from morning till night? Expatiating on all the things you couldn't possibly do? "

" Yes! " said Elen fervently. " I do. I do indeed."

Sally's voice was blurred with tears. " How I hated myself every time I did it! I felt as ruthless as—as Attila the Hun. And you were so gallant about it; but we could all see —— Oh, I wanted to hug you and say, ' Don't you know we're not going? Don't you know we couldn't bear to go to a place where everything would be so horrid for you? ' But I never did. We had to try to goad you into desperation."

" You succeeded very nicely, I will say," Elen assured her, and although her voice was soft, it had a curious strained pitch. Sally opened her lips impetuously. Something about her cousin's aloof face made her stop, gulp, and turn her attention to the view outside the window, for which Elen was thankful. She didn't want either to see or hear Sally just then.

So *that* was the explanation of Sally's delirious joy over the prospect of going to Pakawake, was it? All the agony which had weighted against her heart had been a scheme to make her " desperate " ? A very clever plot, very clever indeed!

It required something unusual to rouse Elen to wrath. Her spicy temper might be easily provoked, but the emotion which quivered through her now, leaving her taut and bitter, was sheer suffocating anger, turning her heart hot, and hammering in her ears. Probably Allan was laughing at the success of his technique. And Sally—her sudden sickening aversion for Sally was frightening.

From his cage in the window above Sally's head, gold-and-ebony Pitti Sing surveyed both girls in evident annoyance. Pitti Sing had a real dislike for prolonged silences on the part of his family. Over and over again, if the Herricks lapsed into what he considered too lengthy a silence, Pitti Sing had been known to break out with a sharp unmistakable note of reproof. He uttered it now, and evidently sensing that this was a forlorn silence, he gave it twice for emphasis, and somehow the sharpness of the sound cleared Elen's brain. The " desperation " cure might have been painful, but so were most of the other treatments which had been administered to her knee. If everything else had failed—Allan couldn't know that instead of being driven to make the effort to walk, she had been sinking into a state of lassitude. There was suddenly a suspicious sound from the window seat.

" Sally! Oh, honey, did you think I was mad?—Well, I was, for about two minutes. I can see now that it was a corking good idea, even though it didn't work! Or maybe —perhaps Allan was smart enough to arrange with the tanagers to have that baby fly just at the psychological moment, and perhaps you had primed Sheba to come strolling along? "

Sally's laugh was unsteady. She shook her fair head positively. " No. We weren't. That was an accident—no, I don't believe that, either. It must have been Providence."

Elen lay the rest of the morning wishing she could join in the last minute scuffle, but glorying in the certainty that now she would not be a useless member of the Pakawake household, a drag on the Herrick activities, someone whose comfort must always be considered, a person to be amused and pitied. That, she hoped fervently, was a thing of the past. She looked around the room which Uncle Billy had nicknamed " the Repair Shop " because everything, from the old Hitchcock chairs Sally had reconditioned and Tommy's trains to Elen herself, had been repaired there! It was the friendliest room she had ever seen, and only yesterday she had lain there wishing she could remain in it all through the summer—perhaps Allan had been right. Perhaps she had grown too content. Well, now there was Pakawake ahead, Pakawake and ——

" Will I be welcomed with a frigid air, a miniature Niagara or a forgiving smile? " Allan looked around the door half fearfully. " You see, I'm not at all sure what you think of me today! " His own smile was quizzical but his eyes were serious.

Elen assumed a haughty expression which would have done credit to a dowager duchess, hastily mopped her eyes, and then wreathed her face in an enchanting smile. " You observe I'm not at all sure myself what I think of you today! But if you came all the way in, I might find out, especially if you give me what Sally said was your ' official permission ' to go to Pakawake and behave like a human being! "

" We'll see—we'll see ——" Allan had once heard Elen say that pet phrase of the medical profession nearly drove her to distraction, especially when the doctor who used it rubbed his hands blandly. He grinned at Elen and went through the motion with a satisfied air. "Humph, yes. Well, I'll give you my official permission to get up and clothe yourself in your right mind, and then we'll see about a little walk."

Half an hour later Elen, flushed and embarrassed, and feeling as though her whole future depended upon placing one foot before the other properly, paced sedately down the long porch. Walking was still a thing which required her undivided attention.

"I—I don't seem to be especially clever at it." She laughed shakily as she wavered in negotiating the turn at the end of the porch.

Allan nodded in thorough satisfaction. "Don't worry. You will be. Exercise is what you need now. Go on to Pakawake and enjoy yourself. Swimming'll be good for you if you don't try to do too much of it. Of course there's the back condition, but we'll attend to that a bit later. Unless you go in for climbing over the cliffs, you'll be all right."

There would come a day in late summer when Elen would remember Allan's laughing warning.

20

Indian Ledge

WITH a soft blue cushion at her back, Elen settled herself for comfort in Larry's canoe and tilted her head back until she could see the entire arch of cobalt blue sky, first reaching high above the twin peaks, Castor and Pollux, and then bending to blend with the timber line on the eastern shore of the lake. She drew a little breath of ecstasy. Even now, when it was mid-August, it still seemed a miracle that the Elen Herrick who had grown so painfully familiar with a chaise-longue and a wheel chair, should be able to walk and swim, and was now blithely setting forth by canoe for a picnic on Gerrold's Rock!

The journey was the most ambitious one Elen had made this summer, and was in honor of Leslie Bradstreet's week-end visit to Pakawake and the two pieces of glorious news she had brought with her: After an extraordinarily long period for consideration, the judges had awarded the two-year music scholarship at the Claudenet Music Institute to Stephen Herrick. No, Leslie wasn't disappointed. Even though she had won the award, she couldn't have accepted it, for a woman musician who had heard her at the audition, and was a friend of Leslie's grandmother, had invited Leslie to be her traveling companion on her South American tour through the fall and winter months. Leslie's mother had been rather doubtful, but her grandmother said peremptorily that there was not the slightest reason for refusing the offer. The association with Madame Denlier, the opportunity of hearing and studying with her, and the fine chance of travel—no mother in her right mind would even consider saying no. Long ago Elen had had her suspicions confirmed, that when Leslie's grandmother desired a thing, it was really an accomplished fact, regardless of how anyone else might feel about the matter.

Going with Madame Denlier, however, was something which Leslie did crave, and craved with all her heart. The chance had really made her bloom. To be thought well of—that was something new in Leslie's experience. The girl who had reached Pakawake that morning was not the stolid, unreachable, maddeningly aloof Leslie. She was a girl with a shy eagerness in her face, a girl who was alert and alive.

Uncle Billy had heard her news with approval. " Good stuff, Leslie. Go and make the most of it! " To his wife he added: " Best thing in the world for the child. Get away from people and even the atmosphere she's always known. It'll be a big chance for her to escape from all her grandmother's stuffy traditions! "

That was a miracle, too—to think of Leslie Bradstreet, of all people, going on a picnic with the Herricks and Larry Peel!

They were approaching the curve in the lake around which one could see the steep path up Castor's tree-covered slope. Elen and Larry had once picked their way on horseback over that dangerous path clear to the summit. Looking up now the path seemed only a deep scar on the mountain. Elen sighed again. Pleasant as her days were, she missed these rides, every one of which had been an adventure. But horseback riding, like mountain climbing and even paddling, were things which were out of the question for her this year.

Larry caught the sigh and looked over solicitously. " Tired? "

Elen shook her head in swift denial. " No. I was just looking at Eagle Trail and wishing—well ——"

" I know. So was I." Larry's understanding was prompt, but untinged with pity. " Next year we'll be scrambling up there again. That's a promise."

The canoe slid past the cliff and suddenly was in brilliant water, every rippling wave touched with dazzling light. Beauty like this closed Elen's throat.

" Larry," she put the question half in earnest, " isn't it your conviction the sky is bluer here than anywhere else? "

Larry held his paddle adrift, and pursed his lips in consideration. " We-ll, it isn't what I would call exactly pale, but I haven't seen the sky all over the world ——"

" It *is* bluer." Elen was almost laughing, but there was an undercurrent of conviction in her tone.

Softly spoken as her words had been, they carried clearly over the water to the second canoe. Sally, paddling in perfect rhythm with Steve, answered her: " I've always said so! And the stars are closer and softer ——"

"The air's different somehow——" Actually this contribution came from Leslie. "It's spicier——"

"And the rain's wetter, and the lightning's more electric," Steve observed neatly.

"In addition the poison ivy is much more abundant and much more poisonous than it is anywhere else!" added Larry sadly. "I can guarantee you that. Want to prove it, Leslie? I can direct you to a beautiful clump, but I won't go within twenty feet of it myself!"

Actually Leslie laughed.

Looking over toward her Elen was aware of a definite sense of failure. Despite all her approaches she had never felt as though she had a real comradeship with Leslie. It was Steve who had cracked wide open what Allan Knight had called Leslie's "steel-plated armor," Steve, with his rare understanding of all underdogs.

Elen was more than half sorry that the canoe trip had to end. The smooth voyage over the dimpling water, the beauty of the dark mountains and the wonder of the sky unmarred by the smallest cloud, made her loath to leave the lake. They reached the landing place just below Gerrold's Rock just in time to lay claim to the best outside oven.

Having plucked Elen out of the canoe, and then beached it, Larry announced that "funny little flummy-diddles" like sandwiches and tartlets had no place in his scheme of picnics. Therefore he produced a steak the size of which none of the rest had ever seen before! Steve promptly said it was too small.—It appeared to weigh only five pounds or so.

" Perhaps, perhaps, my friend," agreed Larry cheerfully. " You may be entirely right. If so—have I heard you do not care for steak? "

Sally hooted and Steve snorted. " If you have, you've been sadly misinformed! "

Larry shook his head mournfully. " Too bad," he sighed. " Of course, you're my friend and all that, but I couldn't let the ladies be served with skimpy portions, and *I* certainly do not intend to do without! "

He need not have been concerned. An hour later Sally, replete with steak, corn, baked potatoes and chocolate cake, observed feelingly: " That was no picnic—that was a Christmas dinner in August. Help me up, somebody! "

Coming down from the broad, warm rock which was becoming too sunny for comfort, they came upon a group of picnickers from neighboring cabins at Pakawake who were organizing a soft-ball team on the beach. The appearance of Steve and Sally was hailed with glee. Steve's curving balls were really beautiful things, and Sally was no mean player.

Sally glanced rather doubtfully at Steve, and Steve, as was his habit when undecided, shrugged one shoulder slightly. Elen, of course, was barred from playing, and Leslie knew nothing whatever about games, having been forbidden by her grandmother to take part in any sport for fear of injuring her hands for her piano work!

" I don't—know," Sally began to murmur, when Larry had the inspiration which was to bring all of them so very close to tragedy.

" You go on and amuse yourselves batting balls," he urged. " Silly stuff, if you ask me. Len and I will proceed to take Leslie up to Indian Ledge. She ought to see it. I don't know why we didn't think of it before.—Sure Len can manage it——" he interjected as Steve frowned at him dubiously. " It's an easy trail. Want to see a miniature Grand Canyon, Leslie? Well, then! 'Bye, children." He waved condescendingly. " Have a good time with your little games. We'll be back by three o'clock."

The trail leading to Indian Ledge was, as Larry had said, an easy one, at least for the greater part of the way. Certainly it was one of the prettiest. Exquisite ferns grew beside the path, tender young trees pointed their brave crown of leaves toward the sky, now and then the flight of a brilliant bird made a vivid flash over the trail and was gone.

Leslie, for whom anything of the kind was miraculously new, was awed and breathless. " I never could have dreamed any place was so still and—lovely! " she breathed. " It—it makes you feel queer—glad and—and close to something—I guess it must be God! "

Larry and Elen exchanged quick glances. So Leslie had caught the feeling too! " It *is* a pretty nice spot," Larry asserted quietly.

For the final quarter mile the trail was steep and stony. Larry solved the problem of that by the simple expedient of lifting Elen bodily and carrying her until they emerged on the ledge itself.

Elen nodded in understanding at Leslie's startled gasp. The place deserved it. Larry had been right. It was like a miniature Grand Canyon, except that at intervals the rocky walls were studded with stunted, half-dead trees, and peering over the edge, a drop of perhaps fifty feet, Leslie could see the jagged, unlovely stumps of trees long dead.

" Nice bed to land on, if you should tumble over, don't you think? " Larry inquired nonchalantly, and Leslie shuddered.

The chasm looked delusively narrow. Suddenly Elen heard herself making the remark for which she could have bitten her tongue out the minute after it had slipped out: " This is the place where you and Steve scared the wits out of the rest of us last year by jumping back and forth, isn't it? "

Larry grinned. " Yep, this is it. You weren't here to be scared then, Leslie, so hold your breath. Here goes! "

Did that queer, croaking cry come from Elen's throat? Larry stepped back, made a running start, and leaped gaily over the chasm. Then he turned, grinned, and waved his hand with a debonair air at the two girls. " Nice work, what? "

Leslie had no answer. She could only shiver. It was Elen's cracked voice that said, " Now—now you'll have to jump back! "

" Oh, absolutely. Just what I intend doing. Stand back. See? So simple ——"

Perhaps it was. Perhaps Larry misjudged his distance. At any rate there was a split second when he seemed to falter in mid-air, and then plunged downward. Leslie screamed. Then she was down on her knees, reaching out her hands, and the shuddering Elen, steeling herself to see the worst, looked over the ledge and saw that a scrubby tree had broken Larry's fall. With one hand he was clutching a limb; the other stretched up to meet Leslie's.

"Just—just a minute," his voice sounded faint. "Then I'll scramble up."

But he couldn't. . . . There was no grip for either knees or feet. Leslie could not drag him back. After the first daze had cleared from Larry's brain, he realized the hopeless horror of the whole situation in one sickening flash. Had Elen been strong and sure of foot, there might have been a chance—but Elen could never descend that trail without help, nor could she aid in lifting him back to the ridge. Larry made one more violent effort to regain the ledge, and almost brought Leslie catapulting into the chasm. Weak and shaken and sick, he tried to face the inevitable.

"Better l-let me go, Leslie. It's no use."

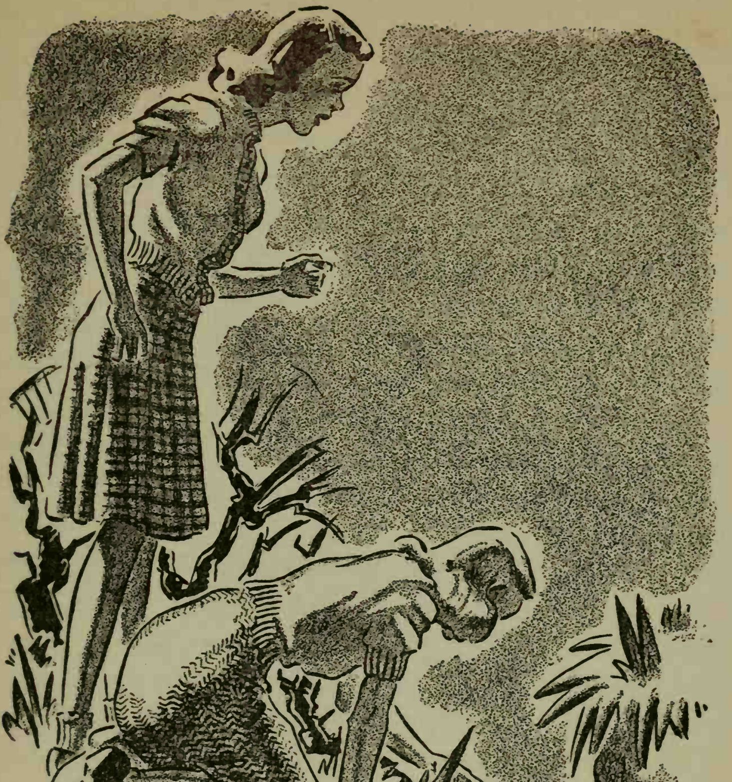
Leslie's only answer was a tighter grip on his wrists.

Elen's head appeared beside Leslie's. "Let me take him. You can run. I can't."

Leslie shook her head helplessly. Larry's voice was fainter: "You couldn't—Len ——"

"Yes, I can. It means lying perfectly flat, and my wrists and hands are strong." Crisp authority suddenly rang in her voice. "Move over. You've got to! Don't you know it's his only chance?"

Somehow the transfer was made: Elen reaching down, Larry straining to reach up until their hands met and clasped. Somehow Leslie stumbled to her feet, gave one backward look at the slim figure stretched prone on the ground, and for the first time fully realized how precari-



With one hand he was clutching a limb; the other stretched up to meet Leslie's.

ously Larry's life hung on a girl's two hands, gave a sob, turned and ran as never Leslie Bradstreet had run before.

Left alone, Elen and Larry managed to smile at each other. If Larry was wondering: " How long can she hold me—how will it feel to drop on those tree-spikes? " and if Elen was asking her heart: " Suppose Leslie loses her way? Suppose Steve can't do anything when he does get here? " they kept their own counsel, and fought valiantly to keep up each other's courage.

Fortunately Larry's feet had discovered a toe-hold in the rocky side. Elen had been right: Her wrists were strong. But her back was not. Pain, searing and breath-taking, rode from her shoulder to back, naggingly at first, as if in promise of what was to come.

On the shelter of the trail the day had been deliciously cool. Here on the exposed ridge, the sun glared down mercilessly. Elen's head felt encircled in fire.

How long? How long? How long?

Larry stirred restlessly, and the movement was a new strain.

" Don't—Larry! "

The boy tilted his head back cautiously. " Sorry, Len." He held very still now, trying to keep in check the shivers which would seize him as he had visions of the long drop he would take if Elen's strength deserted her, and the cruel bed lying in wait for him.

" Len, I—I was a fool! "

She had no strength to waste on an answer.

" Len—when you have to let me go—try not to mind ——"

Her fingers closed on his wrists convulsively.

How long? How long?

She could not shift her position, and Larry's weight became increasingly hard to bear. Pain had her in its full grip now, but she must hold fast to herself. She must hold tight to those clasping hands ——

" Dear God, let me hold fast.—How long?—Make me strong enough.—How long? "

Neither of them ever knew how long it really was before hurrying feet came upon them, before a quiet voice Elen didn't know said, " Steady now—easy—right! "

Perhaps she never saw the rope whirl and settle about Larry's waist, for just then a blinding wave of pain rolled over and engulfed her completely.

21

Joy Cometh in the Morning

FROM somewhere very far away Elen beat her tired way back. She lifted heavy lids and met Aunt Claire's white face, and the kind, grave regard of a stranger. Vaguely she remembered him as a newcomer at Pakawake, and instinctively she recognized him as a doctor. Her eyes traveled past Aunt Claire, and she asked her question of him.

"Am I ——" What had caused her voice to fade like that? "Am I—completely broken to pieces?"

The answer came in the quiet voice she had heard just as blankness overtook her. There was sincerity in the man's tender smile. "No, I don't think you are."

Elen moved her head. "You don't have to—pretend—with me. I'm—used to doctors. Something happened—I'm broken to bits ——"

She was asleep before she could finish.

The next day she really understood, although even a week later she was still marveling at the miracle. Those agonizing thirty minutes when she had been holding Larry had wrought good, and not ill. The misplaced vertebra was back in position. Elen was well.

"I can't believe it," she marveled to Sally and Larry and Steve as the four of them sat on the beach after their mid-afternoon swim. "I was positive that I was completely wrecked!"

Larry's face was white. Something had come into it which hadn't been there before the cliff experience. Larry had left boyhood behind him on Indian Ledge. "And *I* was pretty positive I'd killed you. It—it was a grim feeling."

The silence that fell threatened to be disastrous. Steve looked across the lake, Larry was studying a handful of tiny pebbles, Elen suddenly became absorbed in her sandal. . . . Sally said hurriedly: "You know what I think? Laugh at me if you want to, but I *do* think that God must have guided Leslie into losing her way that day so that she ran into Dr. Mantell on the beach where he was fixing his motorboat! None of the rest of us would have had rope!"

No one seemed inclined to laugh.

"When I think of Elen's being carried home unconscious to poor Mrs. Herrick ——" Larry's voice was dull, and Elen cried out eagerly:

"Oh, Larry—don't! It isn't worth thinking about! I'm well, and it was holding you that cured me!"

Larry nodded glumly.

"Oh, I suppose I know how you feel," conceded Sally. "Of course Elen being Elen she'd wrinkle up her nose at being cured in the ordinary way. She refused to walk until Sheba was going to eat a baby bird before her eyes. She was stubborn about having her vertebra slide into place until you jumped across the chasm. After all Allan's hard work! "

Elen laughed a little and hugged her knees. " If I were the heroine of a book," she said pensively, " I'd be saying nobly, ' Now that this year's all over, I can see what a marvelous time it's been, and I wouldn't change anything about it for the world! ' But I'm not noble. I could easily have forgone everything connected with this year! "

Steve cocked an inquiring eyebrow. " ' Everything,' did the lady say? Oh, yes, I presume you could easily have forgone making that series of bird photographs, and of course if Dad hadn't brought them here to Pakawake and shown them to Mr. Lane, *and* it doesn't mean a thing to you that he bought the whole batch for *American Birds* ——"

Sally carried on the badinage: " Naturally you would just as soon have missed the chance to solve our bowl mystery. As for being the person responsible for Steve's winning the Claudenet audition, why—that was very trivial for you ——"

Larry, however, had a serious question, and he put it point-blank: " If it weren't for the kind of year you had, you wouldn't have been a part of the Herrick family! What about that? "

Elen had been sitting with her eyes fixed steadfastly on the rippling blue waters of the lake. At Larry's speech she turned with an emphatic denial. " I wouldn't have missed this year with the Herricks for anything! " she said soberly. " Only—sometimes I've pitied the Herricks for having me on their hands."

"None of the Herricks have ever had cause to feel sorry for themselves on that account," Steve assured her quickly. "It gave us a chance to make the acquaintance of a pretty fine person."

"One bold of heart," Larry murmured, half under his breath. "Stand up, will you, Len? I *do* like to see you on your feet!"

Somehow it wasn't the time for laughter or bantering words. Elen simply rose to her feet with one lithe bound, and stood, tall, straight, eager—free.

THE END